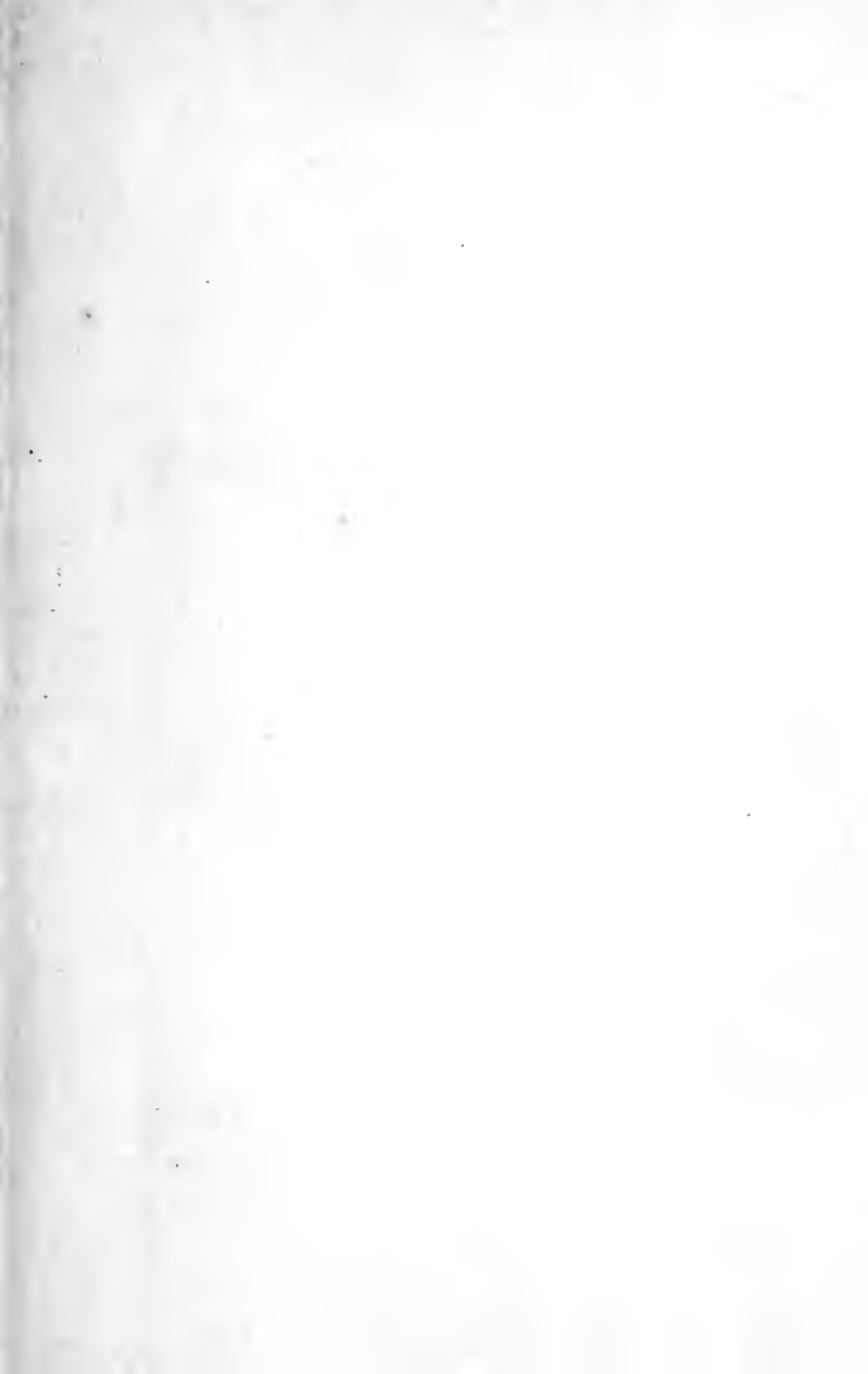


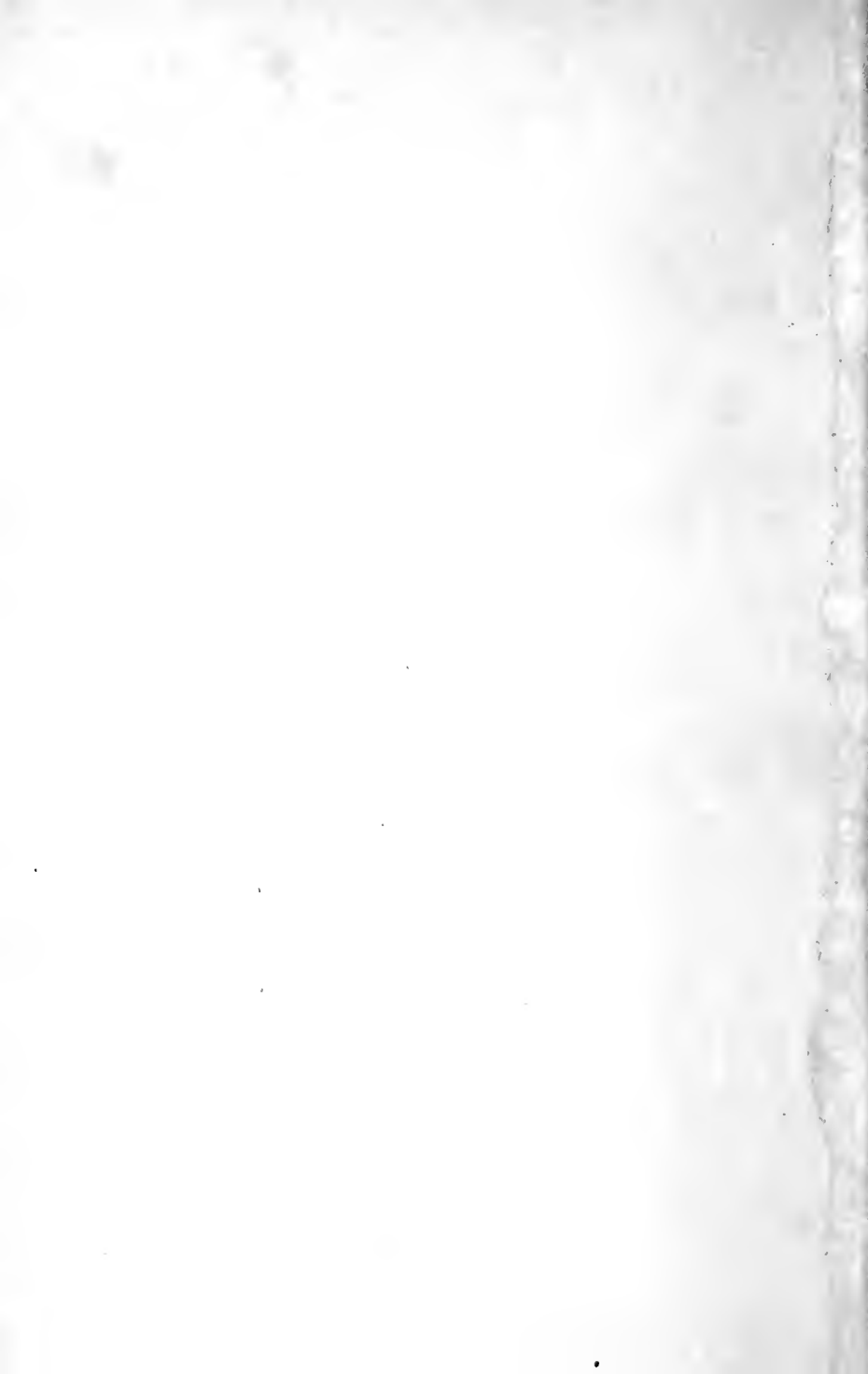
Life of  
Matthew Prior

Francis Bickley



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MATTHEW PRIOR



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MATTHEW PRIOR

# THE LIFE OF MATTHEW PRIOR

BY

FRANCIS BICKLEY

AUTHOR OF "JOHN MILLINGTON SYNGE AND THE IRISH DRAMATIC  
MOVEMENT," "THE CAVENDISH FAMILY," ETC.

LONDON

SIR ISAAC PITMAN & SONS, LTD., 1 AMEN CORNER, E.C.

AND AT BATH, NEW YORK AND MELBOURNE

1914

PRINTED BY SIR ISAAC PITMAN &  
SONS, LTD., LONDON, BATH, NEW  
YORK AND MELBOURNE - 1914

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## PREFACE

THE fact that Prior has never before been given a full-length biography might be urged as proof that such a book was unnecessary ; nor can it be maintained that he was of those a knowledge of whose careers is essential. But although he was really great neither as a poet nor as a diplomatist nor as a statesman, the sum of his achievement in his various activities was considerable, and his life was full of interest. Above all he had a complex and in some ways fascinating personality, which is reflected in his letters. The fine series of his correspondence published in recent years by the Historical MSS. Commission from the Marquess of Bath's collection at Longleat, made it worth while and, it may even be suggested, desirable that this book should be written.

My thanks are due to his Majesty's Stationery Office for permission to quote from the reports of the Historical MSS. Commission, and to his Grace the Duke of Portland and the Most Honourable the Marquess of Bath for permission to examine and make use of unpublished papers in their possession.<sup>1</sup> The debt to Mr. Austin Dobson of anyone who would write on Prior is almost too obvious to mention. His article in the *Dictionary of National Biography* and the introduction and notes to

<sup>1</sup> In referring to the published and unpublished papers of the Marquess of Bath, I have designated them as "Longleat MSS., iii," and "Prior Papers (Longleat)" respectively.

his *Selected Poems of Matthew Prior* (in the Parchment Library) are invaluable. But I must specially acknowledge the courtesy with which he has allowed me to use his important unpublished material. My thanks are also due to Mr. T. J. Wise for allowing me to see his remarkable collection of early editions.

The many sources on which the following pages are based are referred to in foot-notes. Mr. A. R. Waller's Cambridge edition of Prior's writings, which contains so much hitherto unprinted matter and so many valuable bibliographical details, calls for a more particularised gratitude.

F. B.



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# THE LIFE OF MATTHEW PRIOR

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## CHAPTER I

### EARLY YEARS

THAN Matthew Prior, destined to become the crony of statesmen and a recognised leader of literature, to jest with the proudest king in Europe and to give his name to a famous treaty, no English poet has been of humbler origin. For long his very parentage was uncertain, and even now there is nothing to be told of his grandfather beyond the place of his abode.

This was Godmanstone in Dorset, a little village lying five miles north of Dorchester in a valley of unenclosed arable surrounded by pastoral uplands.<sup>1</sup> Old Prior's exact position there does not appear, though it was obviously not one of importance; he may have been a small copyholder. Godmanstone, at any rate, was too tiny a place to support more than one of the half-dozen children born to him by his wife Mary. His daughter,

<sup>1</sup> "Farther along the road [from Cerne to Dorchester] is the unsophisticated village of Godmanstone, where by the side of the stream is the smallest place of entertainment I have knowledge of. This is the Smith's Arms inn, a building of such humble stature that it is possible to touch the roof of thatch. By the side of the door is a window, about one foot high and a yard wide. This constitutes the façade or elevation of the tavern. On the side away from the road the little building is apparently saved from tumbling into the brook by a large willow tree. There is a post-office in Godmanstone, but as it projected too much into the road, a corner has been chipped off it, a procedure that seems to have been simpler than the widening of the highway."—TREVES, *Highways and Byways in Dorset* (1906), p. 339.

called after her mother, was married to "one Hunt of Lighe," presumably Leigh in the Melbury district, famous for its maze. In after years her son, a seaman, appealed to his distinguished cousin for assistance, with unsatisfactory results. "Mr. Prior put him off with some ready money and some guineas to his aunt, but told him he was not married, nor should be, and when he died he would leave what he had amongst his relations." Prior was never a rich man, and it is possible that he wished to conceal from his humble kinsman the pecuniary embarrassments which he did not hesitate to bring to the notice of those in a position to relieve them. It is possible, also, that he actually intended at the time to will his money in the manner indicated. But the sailor, if he survived the poet, must have found the rule *de mortuis* a little hard to observe.

Of Granfer Prior's five sons, Christopher was the only one who stayed at Godmanstone. His marriage is the first recorded in the extant parish register, and his descendants were still there within living memory. It was his son, and namesake, from whose account most of these family details are drawn,<sup>1</sup> and the name of Christopher occurs constantly in the registers for nearly 200 years. Two of old Prior's sons, Thomas and George,

<sup>1</sup> Reported in a long letter dated at Dorchester, 7th December, 1730, from Conyers Place, master of the Dorchester Grammar School, to his kinsman, Conyers Middleton, the celebrated latitudinarian divine. Middleton, for what reason does not appear, had requested Place to make inquiries into Prior's origin [*Welbeck MSS. (Hist. MSS. Comm.)*, vi, 33]. Attention seems first to have been called to this letter, which was published in 1901, by the Rev. J. M. J. Fletcher, vicar of Wimborne Minster, in the *Dorset Nat. Hist. and Antiq. Field Club*, vol. xxxi (1910), 71-84, and *Notes and Queries*, 11th Ser., iv, 161 (Aug., 1911). The present writer, not then being aware of Mr. Fletcher's articles, used it in an article in the *Quarterly Review*, Jan., 1913. Hutchins, the historian of Dorset, also talked with Christopher Prior, but got little from him except vague reminiscence. Place's letter is given as an appendix to this chapter.

were bound apprentice to carpenters at Fordington, whence, when their term was expired, they removed to Wimborne Minster. Arthur became a vintner in London and had much to do with his nephew's destiny. The identity of the fifth brother is not so certain; but he was possibly the Samuel Prior who also supplied the Restoration wits with stimulant and refreshment.

It is George the carpenter who is our immediate concern. Established at Wimborne, he took to himself a wife, and 21st July, 1664, became the father of a son, whom he chose to call Matthew. No record of this event was made in the Wimborne registers, presumably because the parents were Nonconformists;<sup>1</sup> but both date and locality are now fully established. Two houses—only one of which was standing in 1884—were traditionally connected with the Priors, and a passage "leading from the East Boro' to the West" was known as Prior's Walk, a name which, after falling into desuetude, has recently been revived.<sup>2</sup> Some years ago the following inscription was placed in Wimborne Minster:—

TO MATTHEW PRIOR, POET AND SCHOLAR,  
BORN AT EASTBROOK IN THIS TOWN  
ANNO 1664, DIED SEPTEMBER 18TH, 1721,  
IN THE FIFTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF HIS AGE.  
WELD TAYLOR, ESQ., HAS PLACED THIS BRASS  
TO HIS MEMORY.

*Perennis et fragrans.*

There is at present a family in Wimborne which claims kinship with the poet.

As he rose in the world, Matthew grew very reticent about his beginnings. It is difficult, indeed, as will be

<sup>1</sup> They were Presbyterians until 1662, when they became Nonconformists [Seccombe, *Camb. Hist. Lit.*, ix, 146].

<sup>2</sup> See Weld Taylor, *Longman's Mag.*, Oct., 1884, p. 616; and Fletcher, "The Birthplace of Matthew Prior," in *Dorset Nat. Hist. and Antiq. Field Club*, vol. xxxi (1910).

seen later, to acquit him of deliberate falsehood. But having, with all his sophistication, a measure of the true poet's sincerity, he sometimes revealed in verse what in prose moments he preferred to conceal. It is in his poetry, therefore, that one must look for light on his childhood; though little enough will be found, when all is said. There is, for instance, a passage in the fable of *The Mice*, written in 1709, which is meaningless unless taken as autobiographical. It is a parenthetical apostrophe to the poet's mother, and its grave decasyllables are in sharp contrast with the easy hudibrastics of the rest of the poem.

Mother, dear mother, that endearing thought  
Has thousand, and ten thousand, fancies brought;  
Tell me, O! tell me (thou art now above)  
How to describe thy true maternal love,  
Thy early pangs, thy growing anxious cares,  
Thy flattering hopes, thy fervent pious prayers,  
Thy doleful days and melancholy nights,  
Cloistered from common joys and just delights;  
How thou didst constantly in private mourn  
And wash with daily tears thy spouse's urn;  
How it employed your thoughts and lucid time,  
That your young offspring might to honour climb;  
How your first care, by numerous griefs opprest,  
Under the burthen sunk, and went to rest;  
How your dear darling, by consumption's waste,  
Breathed her last piety into your breast;  
How you, alas! tired with your pilgrimage,  
Bowed down your head, and died in good old age,  
Though not inspired O! may I never be  
Forgetful of my pedigree or thee!  
Ungrateful howso'er, mayn't I forget  
To pay this small yet tributary debt,  
And when we meet at God's tribunal throne,  
Own me, I pray thee, for a pious son.

If this is sincere (and why doubt it?) the sentiments do Prior credit. The chief biographical significance of the passage, however, lies in the lines referring to a

sister—not elsewhere mentioned—and to the malady of which she died. For the poet himself was notably thin and hollow-cheeked, coughed all his life, and invariably concluded a bout of hard work with a bout of illness. He was well known to have weak lungs,<sup>1</sup> and it seems extremely probable that he had a congenital tendency to consumption.

As for the fable itself, which is addressed to the poet's friend and secretary, Adrian Drift, its meaning is obscured by the slipshod phrasing which Prior often permitted himself when writing in undress. But the opening lines, at any rate, tally, and, as biographical evidence, must stand or fall with the apostrophe just quoted.

Two mice, dear boy, of genteel fashion,  
And (what is more) good education,  
Frolic and gay in infant years,  
Equally shared their parent's cares.  
The sire of these two babes (poor creature !)  
Paid his last debt to human nature,  
A wealthy widow left behind,  
Four babes, three males, one female kind.

Of this offspring, one was the girl who died of consumption, and another the "first care," who sank under "numerous griefs." The "two [surviving] mice were brought up in one cradle" and bred, "one for the gown, one for the court." As one of these proves to have been Matt himself, it is only reasonable to suppose that the other was his blood brother. "One"—Matt—"went to Holland, where they huff folk, T'other to vent his wares in Suffolk." In the course of time, they meet again at the Three Cranes in Poultry and, after greetings and gossip, the Suffolk parson—the elder "in years, though (God knows) not in sense"—proposes that as they are the last

<sup>1</sup> William Stratford to Lord Harley, 30th September, 1721 [*Welbeck MSS.*, vii, 304]; lines written *In a Window in Lord Villiers' House*, 1696; and elsewhere.

of their name, one of them should provide for its continuance by marriage. He suggests Matt for this office, undertaking to do what he can for the "olive-branches." Matt, however, prefers freedom, though he also is ready to promise avuncular generosity, and "Suffolk," apparently accepting a decision by dice, gives way. In due course a son is born and, at Matt's suggestion, called Adrian, after Drift. By this wile, one gathers, the duty of providing for the infant is shifted from the uncle to his friend. The historicity of this careless tale, scribbled at 10 o'clock one night—perhaps after a convivial evening—need not be taken too seriously. But the probability that Matthew had brothers and a sister is not without interest, for it gives the imagination further material—scanty enough at the best—from which to reconstruct his childhood.<sup>1</sup>

That childhood was probably quite uneventful. There is a tradition that the boy attended the Wimborne free grammar school, and he would sometimes visit his relations at Godmanstone. His grandfather had died many years before he was born, but his grandmother was alive—probably she was the "Widdow Pryor" buried at Godmanstone in 1674—and would take him with her to the local conventicle, as related in the *Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard*:

So at pure barn of loud Non-Con,  
Where with my granam I have gone,  
When Lobb<sup>2</sup> had sifted all his text,  
And I well hoped the pudding next.

<sup>1</sup> On 25th September, 1748, died "Mr. Matthew Prior, nephew to the famous poet, skilful in the oriental languages" [*Gents. Mag.*, xviii, 476]. The existence of a nephew would seem to imply a brother, but the *Gents. Mag.* is not invariably accurate in such details.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Lobb was a Nonconformist divine of some note. He does not seem to have been connected with Wimborne or Godmanstone; but he happened to be rather before the public eye when the *Epistle* was written, and Prior may have used his name as that of a typical "Non-con," preacher.



The last line gives the statement actuality, and helps to date the reference.

During these visits to Godmanstone, Matthew used to sleep with his cousin Christopher. This boy, when he grew up, was a labourer in the fields ; doubtless his father was the same before him ; and young Matt must have seen a good deal of agricultural life. In *The Old Gentry*—unpublished, be it noted, until after his death—he makes an unique reference to his connection with the soil :—

Kingsale, eight hundred years have rolled,  
Since thy forefathers held the plow,  
When this shall be in story told,  
Add, that my kindred do so now.

It is curious, if not very profitable, to speculate as to what would have become of his poetic talent if he had stayed on the land. What sort of figure, one wonders, would he have cut beside Burns ? The question may at first sight appear absurd, but there is more than one point of resemblance. Prior unquestionably had the singing voice, which was at its best and freshest before it had been turned to the uses of diplomacy ; though of course we have, and in the nature of things can have, no evidence of its quality innocent of Westminster and Cambridge. He must have had a living and abundant folk-poetry for his inspiration, for he came from one of the counties wherein the labours of Mr. Cecil Sharp have been so fruitful. He had the roving love of women. The whimsical, self-pitying humour of *Hadrian to his Soul*—" Poor little, pretty, fluttering thing " (characteristic although an imitation)—is not very dissimilar from that of " Wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie," and the ensuing moral. All this Prior possessed in common with the Scot. The question is whether he had that

indescribable something more which is the difference between genius and a pretty talent. Thinking of the squandered fire of Burns, and of the glib courtier into whom Prior developed, a negative answer comes most readily. Genius is not so easily tamed. Yet there are indications in Prior's poetry that had he not been born into the most sterile and sophisticated age of English poetry, and led by circumstances into one of the most artificial of professions, he might have won a place among our most lovable, if not among our greatest lyrists.

Whether his first efforts date from Wimborne or from London cannot be determined ; but we know that he felt the urgency to rhyme at an early age. " As to my own part," he says in his *Essay upon Learning*, " I found this impulse very soon, and shall continue to feel it as long as I can think. I remember nothing further in life than that I made verses : I chose Guy of Warwick for my first hero, and killed Colborn the Giant before I was big enough for Westminster School." The theme suggests the chap-book ; but the inspiring pamphlet may as well have been bought of a London hawker as of a country pedlar ; and if, as he says, he knew the Earl of Dorset when he was ten years old, he cannot have been far advanced in the art of composition when his father carried him to the metropolis. There is, however, one anecdote connected with Wimborne, which, though a proven myth, should never be omitted from any account of Prior. In the chained library of the Minster there is a copy of Raleigh's *History of the World*, through many pages of which a hole has been burnt. The tradition is, or was, that young Matthew, falling asleep in the pursuit of knowledge, had tumbled his candle on to the stately volume. But there are two hard facts in the face of which this pretty tale cannot hope for credence :

first, that the damage was obviously done by the deliberate application of a heated iron ; secondly, that the chained library was not placed in the Minster until 1686, when Prior, a newly admitted graduate of Cambridge, had long said good-bye to his native town.

It was on the advice of his brother Arthur, who was doing well in the wine trade, that George Prior decided to go to London. He set up as a joiner in Stephen's Alley, near King Street, Westminster, and succeeded so well that, "being of a generous temper," he was able to send his son to Westminster School. Then he died, his widow—far from being wealthy, as was the mother in *The Mice*—could no longer pay the fees, and it seemed as if Matthew's education had come to a premature conclusion.<sup>1</sup> It must have been a bitter disappointment to a clever and ambitious boy, who, as we know, found public school life much to his liking.

Matthew was found a berth in his uncle's wine-house. The question of the identity both of house and proprietor has given rise to quite a little literature. The difficulty was that whereas Samuel Humphreys, writing in 1733, said that the poet had been brought up at the Rummer Tavern, Charing Cross—and a Samuel Prior is known to have kept the Rummer both in 1685 and in 1688—Sir James Montagu, the friend of Matthew's boyhood, states that the uncle's name was Arthur, and his house the Rhenish Wine House in Channel (now Cannon) Row. Montagu's authority is better than Humphrey's. In the question of the uncle, Christopher, whose evidence has only recently come to light, supports Montagu ; and the

<sup>1</sup> According to Christopher Prior, Matthew's mother had died and was buried at Wimborne. The evidence of Sir James Montagu, who gives the facts as above, is probably more reliable on this point, and, if the passage from *The Mice* quoted on p. 4 is really autobiographical, it is put beyond question.

final certainty is given by the will of an Arthur Prior, who, as is shown by the correspondence of names and relationships, must have been Christopher's Arthur. This was proved in 1687,<sup>1</sup> and we know that the beneficent uncle was alive in 1685, when Matthew wrote to him, and dead in 1689, when Matthew penned the lines :—

My uncle, rest his soul, when living,  
 Might have contrived me ways of thriving,  
 Taught me with cider to replenish  
 My vats or ebbing tide of Rhenish, etc.

The contending evidence as to the tavern is more equally matched. Here Christopher supports Humphreys and names the Rummer, and although Samuel Prior was there in 1685, Arthur might well have had it before him.<sup>2</sup> Further, in a popular ballad of the time of the Treaty of Utrecht, Matthew is referred to as "Plenipo Rummer." In favour of the Rhenish is the superior weight of Sir James Montagu's word ; the fact that the Duchess of Marlborough, who hated Prior, calls him, as early as 1710, "a boy who waited at the Rhenish wine house, whom the late Lord Dorset put to school out of charity" ; and Prior's own reference, in a letter of 1694, to "our friends in Channel Row." What really settles the matter is that the Montagus were themselves brought up in Channel Row, at Manchester House, which stood opposite the Rhenish, and that, according to Sir James, it was this proximity which led to their intimacy with their humbler schoolfellow. This circumstantial statement admits of no doubt.

Indeed it would be scarcely worth while to treat the point at such length were it not that the double error

<sup>1</sup> It was first mentioned by Mr. G. A. Aitken in the *Contemporary Review* of May, 1890 ; who, however, not knowing of Christopher's statement, did not realise its full significance.

<sup>2</sup> But a Prior had the Rhenish as early as 1660, when Pepys used to frequent it.

had arisen even before Prior's death, and has given modern historians more bother than its actual significance warranted. The explanation of the ambiguity is probably that Matthew, though living at the Rhenish under the care of his uncle Arthur, was a frequent visitor at the Rummer, the proprietor whereof was probably also his uncle. Christopher mentions five brothers and names only four. Very likely Samuel, landlord of the Rummer, was the fifth. Moreover, the distance between the two houses was small : precisely the distance between Scotland Yard and the Admiralty. Documentary evidence that Prior knew both taverns may be found, perhaps, in the lines :—

What wretch would nibble on a hanging shelf,  
When at Pontack's he may regale himself ?  
Or to the house of cleanly Rhenish go ;  
Or that at Charing Cross, or that in Channel Row ?

But he was probably acquainted with many taverns with which he had no permanent connection.

Lying so near Whitehall, the Rhenish was largely patronised by the members of Charles II's convivial court. " Persons of the greatest figure " were constantly in and out of the bar. Here would come Sedley and Dorset, protagonists in many a scandalous frolic ; more or less settled down by Prior's time, and taking a serious part in affairs, but merry gentlemen enough ; and Rochester, perhaps, more brilliant and more profligate than any—a burnt-out candle, very near his end ; and less distinguished persons, hangers-on and wits of the second magnitude, such as the ambiguous Fleetwood Shephard. There must have been good talk when the house was full and the bottle on its rounds.

The three essentials of conviviality, wine, woman and song, were all to be found at Arthur Prior's. Wine, of

course. The second element was embodied in the vintner's own daughter, Catherine, though she was not long in the shop after she had grown to womanhood. Her father, fearing disaster (as well he might), sent her down to Dorchester, where he had many friends, and where Catherine was for a time "a blazing star." But paternal solicitude had come too late. "One Guy of Yorkshire," known as "the Great Guy," drove into the county town with a coach and six and carried her off. It seems probable that this ravisher was Henry Guy, a friend of the King's and an unscrupulous person in affairs other than amatory. During a long term as secretary to the Treasury he amassed a huge fortune, and his advice to Henry St. John, when the future Tory leader first came to Court, was fully in accord with his own practice.<sup>1</sup> Catherine's subsequent career was apparently varied. Deserted, no doubt, by the Great Guy, she is supposed to have become the wife of "a French Marquis or Count called Beloe or some such name"; but it is clear from Arthur Prior's will that she had, at the time of its making, recently received pecuniary assistance from an indulgent father. Conyers Place suggests that she was that "well-beloved and dear cousin, Catherine Harrison," who was the only relative to benefit under Matthew's will. Perhaps the poet, himself no saint, felt a kindness for this errant lady, which his other kinsfolk, earning honest bread in the fields or on the seas, utterly failed to arouse in his breast. The supposition gives us another item for our comparison with Burns.

But to return to the Rhenish, and the third component of the convivial life. Customers such as the authors of "Phillis is my only joy" and "To all you ladies now on land," had little need to go to others for song; yet

<sup>1</sup> Swift, *Corr.* (ed. Ball), iii, 110.

it was on tap, so to speak, in this excellent tavern. For Matthew, while keeping his uncle's books in admirable order, was not neglecting his talent. At the age of twelve or so he wrote a poem as a New Year's gift to his uncle, in which he employed the trite image of the Nile to illustrate the vintner's generosity, "and was heartily ashamed of it a year after." Evidently the critical faculty, as well as the creative, was in process of development. His term at Westminster, brief as it must have been, had given him a taste for the classics, and especially for the poet who was to be his life-long master. In after years a feeling of gratitude may well have been mingled with his affection for Horace. For it was to him that he owed the friendship of the Earl of Dorset, and all that it entailed.

"It happened that this noble lord, coming into the bar of this house to inquire if Mr. Fleetwood Shephard, his constant companion, was come, he surprised this youth, Matthew Prior, with a Horace in his hand, which taking from him to see what book he had got, he asked him what he did with it. Young Matthew answered he was looking upon it. How, said Lord Dorset, do you understand Latin? He replied, a little, upon saying which the noble lord tried if he could construe a place or two, and finding he did, Lord Dorset turned to one of the odes, and bid him put it into English, which Mat did in English metre, and brought it up to the company before they broke up, and the company was so well pleased with the performance, and the address of the thing, that they all liberally rewarded him with money; and whenever that company met there, it was certainly part of their entertainment to give Odes out of Horace, and verses out of Ovid to translate."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Montagu's memorandum.

Charles Sackville—known as Lord Buckhurst in the days when he was Nell Gwynne's "Charles I" and the scandal of respectable cities—but Earl of Middlesex by creation in 1675, and Earl of Dorset by succession in 1677, was a poet and the generous patron of poets. The sketch of his life and character which Prior inserted in his dedication of the *Poems on Several Occasions* to the Earl's son, though heightened by a sense of gratitude and the requirements of the occasion, bears at any rate the stamp of proportion, and there is evidence in support of its essential truth. Dorset was undoubtedly a keen lover of letters and a man of kindly nature. He not only enjoyed Matt's performances, but decided to reward them more effectively than by an occasional tip.

One day, when Dr. Sprat, then Dean of Westminster, and Mr. Knipe, the second master of the school, were at the Rhenish, Dorset asked the boy whether he would like to return to his studies. Matthew eagerly answered "Yes"; his uncle gave a willing consent; and the matter was arranged. Dorset was to pay the lad's schooling and provide him with "other necessities of linen." Arthur Prior and his wife were to be responsible for the rest of his clothing and for his board and lodging as before.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the events leading up to Matthew's re-admission to Westminster, Sir James Montagu's memorandum has been followed as the most reliable authority. Samuel Humphreys gives a more elaborate version: "It happened fortunately for Mr. Prior that the late Earl of Dorset, that prodigy of polite wit and generosity, frequently passed some agreeable hours with his friends at this tavern; and being one day there with several gentlemen of rank, the discourse turned upon one of the Odes of Horace; and the company being divided in their sentiments of a passage in that elegant poet, one of the gentlemen was pleased to say, *I find we are not like to agree in our criticisms; but if I am not mistaken there is a young fellow in the house who is able to set us all right*; upon which he named Mr. Prior, who was immediately sent for and desired to give his opinion of Horace's meaning in the ode under debate. Mr. Prior, very genteely, intreated them to let his



Although he was there under the Spartan rule of Busby, Prior always cherished affectionate memories of Westminster. Writing in 1694 to Knipe, who was still second master, and recommending Lord Dursley's son to his care, he says :—

“ It is at Westminster he must take that tincture of the ancients, and make those improvements in his own language—which no other place can give him . . . . I assure you only that he has wit enough to answer to the great genius of the school I recommend him to . . . . and we doubt not in the least but that in two years under your hands he will have solid learning enough to come abroad again, and give strangers an idea of the greatest school in his own country, and possibly of any other through which he shall travel.”<sup>1</sup>

*incapacity be his excuse for not presuming to offer any imperfect thoughts on what they did him the honour to propose to him ; but that not availing, he at last, with an engaging modesty, gave such an explanation of the passage in dispute as was very agreeable to his polite audience ; and the Earl of Dorset from that moment determined Mr. Prior should pass from the station he was then in, to one more suitable to his promising abilities.”* [Preface to Prior's *Poems* (3rd ed., 1733), vol. iii, pp. ii-iii.] As Mr. Austin Dobson says [*Selected Poems of Matthew Prior*, p. 210,] Montagu's story is “ much more probable than the unauthenticated, and obviously ‘ arranged ’ narrative of Humphreys,” who, as already shown, is by no means trustworthy. Burnet says simply that “ Prior had been taken as a boy, out of a tavern, by the Earl of Dorset, who accidentally found him reading Horace ; and he, being very generous, gave him an education in literature.” Swift's laconic comment on this is “ Malice,” though it is not clear whether he is referring to the bishop's unnecessarily contemptuous tone, or to the statement itself, which is substantially accurate ; Swift only knew Prior in middle age, and may have been ignorant or misled as to his friend's early life.

Prior says that Dorset had favoured his affairs since he was ten years old [*Longleat MSS.*, iii, 32]. He probably knew the frequenters of the Rhenish even during his father's lifetime ; and Dorset may well have given the little boy sweets or pennies. But it seems improbable that the momentous reading of Horace should have been so early. Indeed, if the patron was Earl of Dorset when it took place, Matthew must have been at least thirteen.

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 23.

Again, in a letter from Paris to young Lord Buckhurst, his first patron's son :—

“ Here is no school half so big as Westminster, when the curtain is drawn ; everybody learns in a gazette, without being whipped or fighting with one another, which is a very effeminate way, and I believe is the reason that one English boy can either construe or box with three French boys.”<sup>1</sup>

Prior has the typical public school man's sentimental loyalty. He even approves, in the retrospect, of the methods of the redoubtable Busby ; though one cannot imagine that their present application had much charm for a delicate and comfort-loving boy.

His return to Westminster brought him into contact with the sons of the big house opposite the wine shop, Charles (the future Earl of Halifax) and James Montagu. The three boys used to walk the short distance to school together, and commenced a friendship which was to last, with one interval of estrangement, until death ended it. Another schoolfellow was Thomas Dibben, who came from Prior's native county and was afterwards to translate the poet's *Carmen Seculare* into Latin.

As was to be expected, Matthew did well at his lessons, and was in due course elected a King's scholar. Shortly afterwards he took a step which might have spoilt his prospects, and did, in fact, for a time alienate Lord Dorset. It was Busby's intention, “ for the grace of his school,” to keep his promising pupil there a year longer and then to send him to Oxford, the usual destination of King's scholars. Charles Montagu, however, who was three years older than Prior, was already at Trinity College, Cambridge, and James was soon to follow him. Matthew disliked the notion of being

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 306.

separated from his friends. He was unwilling either to remain at school after James had left, or to go to a different university. When, therefore, one of the Duchess of Somerset's scholarships at St. John's, Cambridge, fell opportunely vacant, he applied for it, and was given it on condition that he should be prepared to go into residence within a fortnight. He actually entered the university before the younger Montagu, to the latter's disgust.

This step naturally annoyed Dorset, who had intended to have his *protégé* elected to Christchurch, and had an undoubted right to be at any rate consulted in the matter. But neither threats nor entreaties availed to dissuade Prior, "for he longed then more to be from school than for anything else they could do to him." So the earl decided to let him go to the devil his own way, and was not reconciled to him until the publication of *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse* had shown him that the boy whom he had rescued from bar-tending was after all likely to do him credit. Nevertheless Matt's choice of college and university was a lucky shot. According to Sir James Montagu the fact that he was the only Westminster boy of his time at St. John's, gave him from the first a distinction which would not have been his either at Trinity or Christchurch, where scholars from the great school were more common. The head of the college, Dr. Gower, "did cast his eye upon him from the beginning."

The official records of Prior's relations with the university provide another of those contradictions which his biographers have found so confusing. The president's entry, made on his admission to St. John's as pensioner, 2nd April, 1683, runs: "Matthaeus Prior, Dorcestre [*altered by a later hand to Middlesexiensis*] filius Georg.

Prior generosi, natus infra Winburne in praedicto comitatu, etc." On the following day Prior made oath on being chosen scholar in these words: "Ego, Matthaeus Prior, Dorcestriensis, juratus et admissus sum in discip. hujus collegii pro Dnâ Sarâ Ducissâ Somersettensi, ex ipsius nominatione, die 3<sup>o</sup> Aprilis, 1683." In the entry recording his admission to a fellowship, 5th April, 1688, he is styled as of Middlesex. When the poet's Dorset birth was supported by tradition only, these discrepancies were more misleading than they are now. Johnson, for instance, gave his preference to Middlesex, though admitting that no Winburne, or Wimborne, was to be found in that county. The discovery of the letter reporting Christopher Prior's narrative has settled the question for ever, but the documents still keep a certain significance. Their ambiguities have still to be explained. Why was the first entry deliberately falsified? Was it to bring it into agreement with the fellowship admissions list? And why was the entry in that list made incorrectly? Prior's ingenuousness is seriously in question. The description of his father as a gentleman in the first entry—if, indeed, he was responsible for it—is nothing more than a characteristic piece of schoolboy snobbery. But in the next five years he had learned the elements of worldly wisdom, and seems to have determined to forget the ploughshare and the plane. Nowhere in his letters or in his poetry, with the exception of the lines already quoted from the posthumous *Old Gentry*, is there any reference to his rural connections. The tavern was less easily obliterated. Too many people knew of it: Dorset, the Montagus, Fleetwood Shephard; and after his political conversion there would always be enemies, such as the uncompromising Duchess of Marlborough, to mention it on inconvenient occasions. He had been dead barely

a dozen years when Humphreys's circumstantial account appeared ; and Burnet's second volume, containing the reference which annoyed Swift, was published a year or two later.

Nevertheless, in his Tory days Prior was probably as reticent about Channel Row as about Wimborne. It is noticeable that the *First Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard* containing the well-known reference to his uncle, though printed several times in his lifetime, occurs in neither of the authorised collections ; whereas the less committal companion piece is included in both. In the short account which he is said to have drawn up with his own hand,<sup>1</sup> his life before his return to Westminster school is condensed into the statement that he was " the son of Mr. George Prior, citizen of London ; who dying while he was very young, left him to the care of an uncle, which proved paternal." John Bancks, who in 1740 produced, as the first volume of Prior's posthumous works, *The History of his Own Time*, compiled from papers in the hands of the poet's executor, went much further than this. " Being to write only of Mr. Prior's public, or political life," he says, " it would be needless to take any notice of his family and education, were it not to obviate an erroneous opinion, which has been industriously propagated by some people, who have represented him *as raised from the bar of a tavern*. How and whence this story had its rise, and in what fallacious dress it has been handed down, may be easily discovered by those who are acquainted with the virulence of party prejudice," a hit not altogether unwarranted, though the instance is unfortunate, at Bishop Burnet. " This excellent poet,

<sup>1</sup> Published in Giles Jacob's *Lives of the English Poets* (1720), p. 152, and reprinted, after revision, with Prior's Last Will and Testament in 1722.

industrious and able statesman, and, what in his opinion was the most valuable of all characters, this truly honest man," proceeds the righteous Bancks, "was the son of a respectable citizen of London, where he was born 21st July, 1664. He was instituted into literature at the royal foundation of Westminster," and so on. Whether Bancks lied wilfully or in ignorance, he may be curtly dismissed as the senseless and uncritical panegyrist who has in every age too often done duty for the biographer. As for Prior himself, his omissions and small adaptations are very venial matters. Clever and ambitious, he knew, or soon learned, that unnecessary insistence on his humble extraction would in no wise assist his career. No halo belonged in those days to the man who had "fought his way up." That Prior was low born, though the precise depth might be unplumbed, was universal knowledge; and the fact was more than once urged against his appointment to high office. Only the most uncompromising moralist can blame him if he practised a silence which was advantageous to himself and could do no possible harm to anyone else.<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile, Matthew was pursuing his studies at St. John's. Since the master of his college looked upon him with a friendly eye, it is clear that he was tolerably industrious in the ordinary work of the schools; but he was also cultivating his poetic talent with assiduity. He does not seem, however, to have set much store by these early pieces, for few of them were printed during his lifetime. Yet, judged by modern standards, they are

<sup>1</sup> Prior is described in his epitaph as "esquire," but a lower style could scarcely have been given to one who had filled such distinguished offices. Horace Walpole believed, or professed to believe, that he was the son of his patron, Dorset [*Letters*, ed. Toynbee, ii, 381]. The suggestion has no significance, unless as evidence—somewhat superfluous—of Walpole's zeal for scandal.

among his most admirable work. Prior's significance in the history of English poetry lies in the fact that he represents, more completely than any other poet, the transition from the seventeenth to the eighteenth century. His earliest poems, written, it may be, under the conscious influence of Cowley and Waller, are pure seventeenth century. The Restoration lyrists were very degenerate descendants of the Elizabethans, but they were none the less in the legitimate line and had retained some spark of that mystical element which to us is poetry itself. Among their successors that spark was utterly extinguished. In Prior its last flicker, perhaps only its reflection, was visible. He kept a faint glow of it all his days, but in his Cambridge years it was at its brightest. That he was young and untroubled by affairs is, of course, a natural explanation of this fact. But that he had crossed the border line between two centuries of widely divergent ideals must also be accounted a constituent of the difference between his earlier and later poetry.

Pope knew of these unpublished *juvenilia*, and thought very highly of them. "Prior kept everything by him," he said, "even to his school exercises. There is a manuscript collection of this kind in his servant Drift's hands, which contain at least half as much as all his published works. And there are nine or ten copies of verses among them, which I thought much better than several things he himself published. In particular, I remember there was a dialogue of about 200 verses, between Apollo and Daphne, which pleased me as much as anything of his I ever read." From the manuscripts left in Drift's possession a collection, including *Daphne and Apollo*—a delightful imitation of Ovid—was published in 1740, as a companion volume to *The History of his own Time* ;

but many pieces lay unprinted until a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> A special interest attaches to these new discoveries in that they include the only verses, except the *Satire on Modern Translators*, which certainly date from their author's undergraduate days. The Pindaric and the pastoral dialogue are the prevailing forms. There is, for example, an ode for the coronation of James II, which is noticeable in view of the fervour with which the poet was soon to welcome the Revolution. *Advice to the Painter upon the Defeat of the Rebels in the West and the Execution of the late Duke of Monmouth*, breathes equal loyalty to the House of Stuart. Other pieces are of more private interest, and the virtues of the Dorset family come in for celebration. A pastoral on the earl's second marriage, which took place 7th March, 1685, suggests that Sir James Montagu was wrong in saying that Dorset was not reconciled to his *protégé* until after the publication of *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse*; unless, indeed, the poem were in the nature of a "petition piece." The countess walking in her garden and the birth of a son to the noble pair, who appear as Daphnis and Dorinda, are also themes for song. The recipient of two poems, *To Madam K. P.*, a *Pastoral Dialogue*, and *Not Writing to K. P.*, was the poet's aunt, Katherine, wife of Arthur Prior. The second of these can be accurately dated. It is obviously the "bad verse" referred to in the following letter, which Prior wrote to his aunt in August, 1685:—

"My neglect, Madam, is but a new occasion for you to exercise your goodness on. You, like heaven, can as often return a pardon as I give up my repentance; the

<sup>1</sup> See *The Writings of Matthew Prior*, ed. A. R. Waller, vol. ii: "Dialogues of the Dead and Other Works in Prose and Verse," pp. 271 *et seqq.*



truth of which, Madam, be pleased to accept as well in honest prose as in bad verse: though, Madam, this afflicts my zeal, that the oracle never answers. My religion depends much upon faith, and I can tell no more news from my heaven than the astrologers from theirs, unless like them I fairly guess at it. I should really be afraid to write did I imagine your silence proceeded from your anger. I am extremely willing to attribute it to your hatred which you said you had to writing. That was in your last letter dated a considerable time ago. I'll swear to show both how your Ladyship abhors pen and paper, and what reason I have to complain. If your goodness will allow me one letter a year, after the great satisfaction of hearing how you do, let me know if *Jenny does fill out grains in silver pails*; if Mrs. Wilson be not still out of humour because the house is not burnt; if Mrs. Watson thinks her windpipe secured by this time, and that cribbage of a Sunday night is not Popish doctrine. Now to be serious, Madam, with ten thousand thanks for all your favours and as many prayers that you would renew them by a letter, wishing you as much health as a country parson in the dedication of his sermon to his patron, I am, etc."<sup>1</sup>

This letter, and one written three weeks earlier to his uncle, are the only two from Prior to his kinsfolk which have survived. They testify to the excellent relations which existed between the young man and these kindly taverners. To his uncle he had written:—

"If my necessity, Sir, encourages my boldness, I know your goodness sufficient to excuse one and relieve t'other. I am very sensible what expenses my education puts you to, and must confess my repeated petitions might have wearied any charity but yours; but since I have no

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 1.

advocate, no patron, no father but yourself, pardon that importunity which makes me seek the kindness of all these in you, which throws me at your feet to beg at once your blessing and assistance, and that, since your indulgence has set me safe from shore, you would not let me perish in the ocean.”<sup>1</sup>

The exclusive eulogy is a little unjust to Dorset, but an undergraduate in need of ready cash cannot be too scrupulous, and Prior probably thought that he had seen the last of the earl's generosity, of which he afterwards made ample acknowledgment.

Arthur Prior died, as already mentioned, about 1687. He left Matthew £100, a respectable legacy considering that he had several children of his own. His widow survived until the spring of 1699, when she died of apoplexy. She may not have been a good correspondent—she makes the same complaint against her nephew—but she was undoubtedly a good aunt. While Matthew was abroad she acted as his banker, and seems sometimes to have suffered from his tendency to overdraw.

There is a third letter belonging to 1685, after which there is a gap of more than seven years in Prior's extant correspondence. It is addressed to Dr. Gower, and presents several points of particular interest.

“The great Richelieu,” it runs, “is confessed not only to have pardoned but encouraged Boileau's muse, whilst she [as] boldly showed as happily prevented the barbarity of their language : and a Prelate of our Church, in worth and excellence scarce inferior to the then famous Cardinal, is known to have endeavoured the like kindness to ours. These eminent examples have given me this present presumption ; made me without blushing bring poetry to the most religious man and satire to the best natured.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

However unlike this attempt may prove to those excellent pieces, 'tis written with as honest a design and has as great a patron, I hope, to protect it : it may discover the disease it cannot cure ; let our translators know that Rome and Athens are our territories ; that our Laureate might in good manners have left the version of Latin authors to those who had the happiness to understand them ; that we accuse not others but defend ourselves, and would only show that these corruptions of our tongue proceed from him and his tribe, which he unjustly casts upon the clergy. Thus, Sir, I humbly throw this trifle at your feet, hoping the product of my vacant hours may prove the diversion of yours, and too well assured of the greatness of your kindness to fear the severity of your judgment."<sup>1</sup>

Under the same cover Prior enclosed a copy of the *Satire on Modern Translators*. His authorship of a poem which he afterwards saw fit to disown is thus put beyond question ; a point to which further reference will be made in due course. The antipathy to Dryden, which was soon to take notable shape, is already strong. The phrase, "Let our translators know that Rome and Athens are our territories," and what follows, seem to indicate an intention on Prior's part to take holy orders ; at least it is difficult to understand this exclusiveness in any other sense, for Dryden, as well as he, had been educated at Westminster and Cambridge. Years later, a rumour that Prior was to enter the Church appeared in Dyer's Newsletter and made the Bishop of Winchester tremble on his throne.

In 1686 Matthew graduated B.A., and in 1688 he was elected to a fellowship of St. John's, which with great prudence he kept through all the vicissitudes of his varied

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

life. Between these two events, he had made his first excursion into print. The genesis of *The Country Mouse and the City Mouse* is best described in the words of Sir James Montagu. After relating how Prior, on his coming to Cambridge, had renewed his friendship with the writer's elder brother Charles, he proceeds : " And the first fruit of this intimacy was no less beneficial to the public than to themselves, for about this time came out the celebrated poem of *The Hind and the Panther*, written by Mr. Dryden, who had then professed himself of the Romish religion, and that poem being very much cried up for a masterpiece of that great poet, it created great dissatisfaction to all who opposed the bringing in of popery by King James, and it was the wish of many that the same should be answered by some ingenious pen, but it is not certain that either Mr. Montagu or Mr. Prior at first resolved to undertake the doing it, but the book which came afterwards out by the name of *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse*, which was allowed by all persons to be the most effectual answer to that poem of Mr. Dryden's, and which was composed by Mr. Montagu and Mr. Prior jointly together, happened to owe its birth more to accident than design ; for *The Hind and the Panther*, being at that time in everybody's hands, Mr. Prior accidentally came one morning to make Mr. Montagu a visit at his brother's chambers in the Middle Temple, London, where the said Mr. Montagu lodged when he was in London, and the poem lying upon the table Mr. Montagu took it up, and read the first four lines in the poem of *The Hind and the Panther*, which are these :—

A milk white hind immortal and unchanged  
Fed on the lawns, and o'er the forest ranged,  
Without unspotted, innocent within,  
She feared no danger for she knew no sin.

Where stopping, he took notice how foolish it was to commend a four-footed beast for not being guilty of sin, and said the best way of answering that poem would be to ridicule it by telling Horace's fable of *The City Mouse and the Country Mouse* in the same manner, which being agreed to, Mr. Prior took the book out of Mr. Montagu's hands, and in a short time after repeated the four first lines, which were afterwards printed in *The City Mouse and Country Mouse*, viz. :—

A milk white mouse, immortal and unchanged  
Fed on soft cheese, and o'er the dairy ranged,  
Without unspotted, innocent within,  
She feared no danger for she knew no gin.

The repeating these lines set the company in laughter, and Mr. Montagu took up the pen by him, and wrote on a loose piece of paper, and both of them making several essays to transverse, in like manner, other parts of the poem gave a beginning to that work, which was afterwards published to the great satisfaction of many people, and though no name was set to the book yet it was quickly known who were the authors of it, and as the reputation Mr. Montagu got thereby was the foundation of his being taken notice of, so it contributed not less to the credit of Mr. Prior, who became thereby reconciled to his first patron, the Earl of Dorset."

Lord Peterborough, on being asked whether Montagu had not written the satire with Prior, replied, "Yes, just as if I was in a fine chaise with Mr. Cheselden here, drawn by his fine horse, and should say,—Lord, how finely we draw this chaise!"<sup>1</sup> But Sir James, in whose chambers the game was begun, was evidently present at the time, and gives his brother credit not only for a considerable share in the performance but for the

<sup>1</sup> Spence, *Anecdotes*, 102.

original suggestion. *The Hind and the Panther* was a fair target for the satirist; and this joint retort, the machinery of which was borrowed from Buckingham's *Rehearsal*, is an amusing travesty enough, though most of its vitality has evaporated with the controversies which produced it. When fresh from the press, however, it made a hit; and Dryden is said to have wept over the ingratitude of two young fellows whom he had always treated with civility. This anecdote, as Mr. Austin Dobson observes, is "one of those which are the despair of the biographer."

Whatever this attack on the old laureate may have done for Charles Montagu—and the fact that he was a Montagu probably did more—his collaborator at any rate reaped no immediate advantage from it. His sense of injustice is vented in the *Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard*, where, after accusing that gentleman, who seems to have been the administrator of Dorset's patronage, of seducing him from his uncle's business or the law

to follow  
That sneaking whey-faced god, Apollo,

he concludes :

My friend Charles Montagu's preferred  
Nor would I have it long observed,  
That one mouse eats, while t'other's starved.

Prior's first employment was of a private nature. It was a custom of St. John's to send an annual copy of verses to the Earl of Exeter in acknowledgment of his benefactions to the college. In 1688, the year of his fellowship, Prior was chosen to pay this tribute, which took the form of the exercise on the third chapter of Exodus subsequently printed first among the *Poems on Several Occasions*. Shortly afterwards, the Earl was requiring a tutor for his sons, and Dr. Gower recommended

the poet. So Prior went to Burleigh and stayed there about a year.

Thence he sent Shephard another epistle—the tribute, indeed, like that of St. John's to Lord Exeter, would seem for a time to have been annual—which contains some characteristic details of his daily life.<sup>1</sup>

For me, whom wandering Fortune threw  
From what I loved, the town and you :  
Let me just tell you how my time is  
Past in a country life—Imprimis,  
As soon as Phoebus' rays inspect us,  
First, Sir, I read, and then I breakfast ;  
So on, till foresaid god does set,  
I sometimes study, sometimes eat.  
Thus of your heroes and brave boys,  
With whom old Homer makes such noise,  
The greatest actions I can find,  
Are that they did their work and dined.  
The books of which I'm chiefly fond  
Are such as you have whilom conned ;  
That treat of China's civil law,  
And subjects' rights in Golconda ;  
Of highway-elephants at Ceylan,  
That rob in clans, like men o' th' Highland ;  
Of apes that storm, or keep a town,  
As well almost as Count Lauzun ;  
Of unicorns and alligators,  
Elks, mermaids, mummies, witches, satyrs,  
And twenty other stranger matters ;  
Which, though they're things I've no concern in,  
Make all our grooms admire my learning.

Critiques I read on other men,  
And hypers upon them again ;  
From whose remarks I give opinion  
On twenty books, yet ne'er looked in one.

<sup>1</sup> He has elsewhere recorded a not very brilliant repartee of which he was the author in the early days of his tutorship. "To the old Earl of Westmoreland at Burleigh, he not knowing me nor I him : I was just then come thither to be governor to the young Lord Burghley. Ea. : "Pray, Sir, don't you belong to the Lord Burghley ?" Answer—"No, Sir, I have made but a sorry bargain of it, if he does not belong to me !" [Prior Papers at Longleat, xxi, f. 136d.]

Then all your wits, that fleer and sham,  
 Down from Don Quixote to Tom Tram ;  
 From whom I jests and puns purloin,  
 And silyly put 'em off for mine :  
 Fond to be thought a country wit :  
 The rest,—when Fate and you think fit.

Sometimes I climb my mare, and kick her  
 To bottled ale and neighbouring vicar ;  
 Sometimes at Stamford take a quart,  
 Squire Shephard's health—with all my heart.

The poem ends with a reference to the time when Matt shall return to town as the successor of Shadwell, who had himself recently superseded Dryden, in the laureateship.

#### APPENDIX TO CHAPTER I.

CONYERS PLACE TO CONYERS MIDDLETON

DORCHESTER, *December 7th, 1730.*

Cousin Middleton, pursuant to your request, I send you here an account of Mr. Prior's parentage, from his father's brother's son, Christopher Prior. Mr. Prior's grandfather lived at Godminston, a small village three miles from this town, he had five sons and one daughter, called Mary, married to one Hunt of Lighe, a village eight miles hence. Thomas and George, two of the brothers, were bound apprentice to carpenters at Fordington joined to this town ; whence they removed to Wimborne about eighteen miles hence eastward where Thomas lived and died, and where George the father of Mr. Prior married, but how long he lived there I cannot find, only his wife, Mr. Prior's mother, lies buried at Wimborne or by it, with whom I have heard that Mr. Prior desired to be buried before Westminster Abbey was in his eye. That Mr. Prior was born at or by Wimborne I find because Christopher said he remembers his cousin Matthew coming over to Godminston when a boy and lying with him. George, his father, after his wife's death, I suppose, moved to London, encouraged by his brother Arthur, who had succeeded in the world and kept the Rummer Tavern by Charing Cross, the great resort of wits in the latter end of King Charles the Second's reign and in my remembrance ; who took in his nephew Matthew to wait in the tavern, from which time you know his history. Arthur had much acquaintance in this town, whither



he used each summer to come down, to see his native country. He had one son named Matthew, I believe long since dead, and a daughter named Catherine, whom her father sent down to this town, where she was a blazing star some time, to secure her virtue from some of his great guests, but it proved too late : one Guy of Yorkshire, called then I remember the Great Guy, followed her and attended her here with his coach and six, whence he carried her off.

Christopher says he heard that Catherine married first a French Marquis or Count called Beloe or some such name, whom I take to be that cousin Catherine Harrison mentioned in Mr. Prior's will, if she is an old woman ; otherwise it is likely her daughter. A son of his aunt Hunt made application to Mr. Prior, when in his glory, for something to be done for him, being a seaman ; but Mr. Prior put him off with some ready money and some guineas to his aunt, but told him he was not married, nor should be, and when he died he would leave what he had amongst his relations.

Christopher, who gives me the greatest part of this account, lives as his father Christopher did before him in the mansion-cottage of the family at Godminston ; he is an honest labouring man, had nine children but now only six ; within this few months last past it has pleased God to afflict him with the loss of both his eyes sunk quite into his head, which has thrown him a charge on the parish. He and his family have much of Mr. Prior's face and complexion, large cheek bones, a deep red in their cheeks, for such had Mr. Prior when young ; this family are now the only relations of the name that I hear of, and if my acquainting my Lord of Oxford with it might prove an occasion to him to exercise some of that generosity for which he is so renowned towards these poor remains of the name and blood, he would through these parts raise living monuments of his regard to Mr. Prior's memory at an easy rate, with brasses more to the life than that of Coriveaux ; and if that last part of human vanity<sup>1</sup> had been mixed with some little regard to this branch of his name and blood, I think Mr. Prior would have discharged but a natural duty.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A reference to Prior's will.

<sup>2</sup> *Welbeck MSS.*, vi, 33.

## CHAPTER II

### AT THE HAGUE

WHEN Prior wrote the *Second Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard*, the Revolution which set William of Orange on the throne of the Stuarts was already accomplished. A minor result of that event was to terminate the poet's engagement in Exeter's service. The earl was no friend of the new order, and his household offered little prospect of advancement to an ambitious young man. Moreover, he had made up his mind to retire into Italy, where, in the accumulation of those works of art which were his chief delight, he could forget the discomforts of his faction-ridden country.

Matt's sojourn at Burleigh, however, although short, was of considerable service to him. It taught him the usages of good society and the elements of art-criticism. Its direct poetic results were the lines *To the Countess of Exeter playing on the Lute*, and those on the *Picture of Seneca dying in a Bath*, a work by Jordaens which adorned the earl's gallery.

Prior was for a time out of employment. But he had his fellowship, and the fact that there is a college exercise of his dated 1690 seems to indicate that he returned to Cambridge. About this time he is said to have been paying his addresses to Elizabeth Singer, who, as Mrs. Rowe, became celebrated as a moral and devotional poetess.<sup>1</sup> He subsequently printed her pastoral of *Love and Friendship* among his own works as the text of a fervent poetical address to its author. According to Sir James Montagu, it was now that he wrote the epistle

<sup>1</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Mitford, i, vii.

to Shephard asking for employment. This may well be so ; for although the rhymed letter dated from Stamford is called the *Second Epistle*, and it would therefore appear that the companion piece was written earlier, this numerical distinction only occurs in the unauthorised collection of 1707 and is quite likely to be inaccurate. The point is unimportant. At any rate " t'other mouse " was not left to starve. In 1690, through the influence of Dorset, now fully appeased, Prior was appointed secretary to Lord Dursley, the new English minister at the Hague, and took the first step in a long and useful career in the diplomatic service. He was at first unwilling to accept this post, partly on account of his insufficient knowledge of French, and partly, maybe, from a fear that a subordinate position abroad, entered upon before his name had become familiar to the bestowers of office at home, might spell premature oblivion. But, whatever his scruples, to the Hague he went. That city was destined to be his home for many years.

For a time, however, there is little news of him. He was, of course, present at the magnificent congress of 1691, when the princes of Germany and the ambassadors of Europe assembled at The Hague to meet William III and discuss a plan of campaign against Louis XIV. As secretary to the British embassy, he would naturally play a considerable if humble part on such an occasion, and Lord Dursley's gout increased his responsibility. He came into frequent contact with William, who conceived an enduring liking for him and subsequently appointed him a gentleman of his bedchamber. Prior, on his side, was ever ready to express, in prose or in verse, his unbounded admiration for his sovereign. The major events of William's reign rarely failed to inspire him. A *Hymn to the Sun*, for which Purcell wrote the

music, was sung before the King and Queen on New Year's day, 1694. The death of Mary and the Assassination Plot received their tribute of grief and indignation, and the turn of the century produced a lengthy and elaborate *Carmen Seculare*. More readable than any of these is the piece in which, to celebrate the retaking of Namur in 1695, Prior with merciless and brilliant wit, burlesques, stanza by stanza, Boileau's pompous ode on the capture of that city by the French in 1692. The poem appeared anonymously, for, as its author wrote to his publisher, Jacob Tonson, "a secretary at thirty is hardly allowed the privilege of burlesque." His friend, Sir William Trumbull, at that time Secretary of State, undertook the arrangements for its printing.

"Care will be taken here of the poetry," he wrote to Prior, "and that it do not suffer in the printing, as it is pity it should. I see no reason why the author should be ashamed of battering B[oileau]'s poem, and reducing it, any more than we the castle, since it is our honour that everything that concerns Namur be on our side. However, I have enjoined T[onson] silence, as is desired, though it is not possible to keep it long a secret. I will add but one circumstance to that purpose, which is that Fleet [wood] Shephard knows it."<sup>1</sup>

It seems that Shephard had as poor a reputation for discretion as for the virtues which are accounted of greater importance.

Earlier in that year a more melancholy occasion had exercised Prior's pen. The death of Queen Mary, so genuinely mourned both by the King and by his subjects, evoked what Johnson calls an "emulation of elegy." Almost every writer of note—with the conspicuous exception of Dryden—produced his funeral ode. Prior

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 64, 17th September, 1695.

made one of the chorus ; but Johnson misrepresents him when he says that he “ was too diligent to miss this opportunity of respect.” It would be idle to deny that he sometimes hymned authority in the hope of material reward. He frankly dubbed himself “ a professed panegyric poet.” In the present case, however, he showed no undue anxiety to profit by his master’s sorrow.

As a matter of fact, his own grief for the amiable Queen—though sharpened, on his own confession, by fear of pecuniary loss—was too sincere to be calculating. “ *O fallaces nostras spes et brevem fiduciam humanam !* ” he writes to James Vernon. “ What have we to say but our prayers for the preservation of the King’s life ? ” And to Charles Montagu : “ *Pallida mors aequo*—has struck us all here more than an earthquake. I suppose it has had the same effect on your side, but my dear master has read the philosophers from Epictetus to Lucian, so we are not so much to deplore our loss as to strive to make the best on’t.” The scraps of Latin, the reference to the philosophers, sound artificial to modern ears, but they came spontaneously enough 200 years ago, and are certainly not to be read as evidence of insincerity. There is indeed something artificial, something too deliberately “ plain ” English, in our shyness of intellectual consolations. Our professed reverence for the sages is of little worth if we refuse to admit their virtue in the crises of life. Nor is there anything to cavil at in Prior’s statement that the melancholy occasion dazed him into a colic. On a man of his physical constitution, strong emotions would very likely have some such effect. The fullest expression of his feelings is in a letter addressed to his friends, Lord and Lady Lexington :—

“ Since the horrid loss of her Majesty, at naming of which my Lord will sigh and my Lady will cry, I protest

I have written nothing but nonsense, which is a present I humbly offer to some of my correspondents, but it is not very proper for you. Upon this occasion I have lost my senses and £100 a year,<sup>1</sup> which is something for a philosopher of my circumstances; but *Deus providebit*, which being interpreted is (to my Lady) God will provide, is my motto (and for it I hope Mrs. Davers will have a good opinion of me, for it is taken from the Scripture). I have given notice of this cruel change to the States and Ministers here, in a long trailing cloak and a huge band, the one quite dirty with this thaw, the other really slubbered with my tears. I am so much in earnest in this sad affair that people think I am something very considerable in England, that have such a regard to the public, and it makes me cry afresh when they ask me in what county my lands are. Whether this proceeds from loyalty or interest God knows, but I have truly cried a basin full. *Je ne puis plus*; 'tis impossible for me to tell you the sorrow that reigns universally in Holland: these people, who never had any passions before, are now touched, and marble weeps. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

In another letter to the same correspondents, with whom he was on terms of great intimacy, he says that the Queen's death had left a platonic void in his heart.

At any rate, he had no heart for poetry. "We have nothing but the dismal sound of bells, and more dismal chime of many bad poems on too good a subject," he writes just after the event; and two months later: "We have had nothing new here for some months but volumes of bad poetry upon a blessed Queen. I have

<sup>1</sup> "Prior held a small appointment in the establishment of Queen Mary" [*Editor's note*]. This was worth £100 a year, which, after all, he does not appear to have lost at her death. See *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 69; *Cal. State Papers Dom.*, 1694-5, p. 501.

<sup>2</sup> *Lexington Papers*, p. 46.

not put my mite into this treasury of nonsense, having been too truly afflicted by the subject to say anything upon it." To Lord and Lady Lexington he wrote: "I am as yet so afflicted for the death of our dear mistress, that I cannot express it in bad verse, as all the world here does; all that I have done was to-day on Scheveling sands, with the point of my sword:—

Number the sands extended here;  
So many Mary's virtues were:  
Number the drops that yonder roll;  
So many griefs press William's soul."

He had plenty to do, also; for at this time he was England's sole representative at the Hague. There were visits to pay and "melancholy letters" to write. The etiquette of the occasion bothered him, for he was in a peculiar position, being secretary in name but a minister in effect. Was he to wear "a long trailing cloak" or only ordinary mourning? It was decided that he should wear a band and long cloak when he delivered the letters to the President of the States and the various ministers at the Hague, keep very strict mourning and his band until the funeral, and thenceforth appear as other men. These details, he wrote to Dorset, were "great incumbrances on an English Muse who in her perfect liberty was but indifferent." So while poets with more leisure or lighter hearts poured out their Pindaric woe, the secretary at the Hague was mute.

But his voice was missed. His reputation as a poet, though his published works were few as yet,<sup>1</sup> was already high. His silence was the talk of the coffee-houses. On April 19th, when Mary had been in the Abbey for nearly two months, Vernon wrote to him:—

"I could only tell you by the last post that I had received your medals, and I can now satisfy you they are

<sup>1</sup> They had appeared chiefly in Dryden's *Miscellanies*.

distributed; and must further acquaint you, if you think this will acquit you from the expectations people have of a poem from you, you will be mistaken, for they say you are not to come off with a posey and a shred of Horace; and they further desire, if you write anything in memory of the Queen, that you will take a little more notice of her than you do in her stamp, where she is neither represented by the effigies or the motto. I know not how you will like it, I should tell you what the critics say; but they say some poets and painters have placed themselves behind a curtain on purpose to lie *perdu* for censures."<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps this last remark stung Prior. In any case, he had his poem ready to offer to the King—"by whom," observes Johnson, "it was not likely to be ever read"—on his arrival in Holland a fortnight later.

Vernon's reference to the medals, which are also mentioned by other correspondents, is interesting. Prior, it seems, like Pope and Gay, had some turn for draughtsmanship, or at any rate for designing. Writing to Bolingbroke from Paris in regard to a medal which was to be struck in celebration of the Peace of Utrecht, he says: "I dislike your medal with the motto *Compositis venerantur armis*—I will have one of my own design; the Queen's bust, surrounded with laurel, and with this motto, *Annae Aug. felici Pacificae*, Peace in a triumphal car, and the words *Pax missa per orbem*, this is ancient, this is simple, this is sense. Rosier shall execute it in a manner not seen in England since Simon's time."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Longleat MSS., iii, 50.

<sup>2</sup> *Poetical Works*, ed. Mitford, i, xxiv n. A medal, or rather a pattern piece for a farthing, very similar to this, is described by Hawkins, *Medallic Illustrations of British History* (Anne, No. 260). Among the medals struck to commemorate Mary's death Hawkins mentions one (William III and Mary, No. 361) which had a motto from Horace and no portrait of the Queen.



Many years earlier, at the beginning of 1696, he had written to Keppel from the Hague: "On dit qu'à Paris on a frappé une médaille avec l'effigie de sa Majesté et des paroles bien outrageantes; si cela se trouve vrai j'en ferai frapper bien d'autres ici, et par ma foi et ma conscience, comme auroit dit en pareil cas Mons. Jour, je les ferai distribuer de la Hollande jusques à Japon."<sup>1</sup> He also apparently designed initials for the 1718 edition of his own poems.<sup>2</sup>

To his early years at the Hague must belong a good deal of Prior's unofficial poetry. He more than once complained, inaccurately, that the man of affairs had killed the poet in him; but until 1694 his responsibilities were not heavy. He praised his chief's wife, Lady Dursley, as he had formerly praised the Countesses of Dorset and Exeter, and he has left a record of his holiday hours which is one of his masterpieces.

While with labour assiduous due pleasure I mix,  
And in one day atone for the business of six,  
In a little Dutch chaise on a Saturday night,  
On my left hand my Horace, a nymph on my right:  
No *mémoire* to compose, and no *Post-Boy* to move,  
That on Sunday may hinder the softness of love,  
For her, neither visits, nor parties of tea,  
Nor the long-winded cant of a dull refugee.  
This night and the next shall be hers, shall be mine,  
To good or ill fortune the third we resign:  
Thus scorning the world, and superior to fate,  
I drive on my car in professional state.  
So with Phia through Athens Pisistratus rode;  
Men thought her Minerva, and him a new god.  
But why should I stories of Athens rehearse,  
Where people knew love, and were partial to verse;  
Since none can with justice my pleasures oppose,  
In Holland half drowned in interest and prose?  
By Greece and past ages what need I be tried,  
When the Hague and the present are both on my side?

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Swift, Corr.*, iii, 8.

And is it enough for the joys of the day,  
 To think what Anacreon or Sappho would say ?  
 When good Vandergoes, and his provident Vrow,  
 As they gaze on my triumph, do freely allow,  
 That, search all the province, you'll find no man *dar* is  
 So blest as the Englishen Heer Secretáris.

In these inimitable lines Prior sums up his pleasures. His soberer activities are recorded in more appropriate prose ; though his letters, which have been preserved in great numbers for this period, and are the main source of his biography, can by no means be called prosaic in the derogatory sense.

Prior's real career as a diplomatist began when Lord Dursley retired at the end of 1693. " My Lord Dursley has asked and obtained his *congé* to quit Holland entirely," he wrote to the Earl of Pembroke in October. " I know not how Fortune may dispose of me, or if she takes any care at all of such little people as I am. I am sure of your Lordship's favour if anything should be proposed for me, and beg the continuance of your goodness."<sup>1</sup> To Dorset he wrote : " We have at present no minister at either of the Northern Crowns, Vienna, Berlin or Ratisbon . . . . My having had the honour to be bred by your Lordship, and trailed a pen here onward of four years, makes some people flatter me that I may not be forgot in this great harvest with few labourers, since Aglionby, Cresset and Stepney, who are already working, are journeymen as I am, have about the same estates at home, and are sent to preach politics as the apostles were on a better errand, without purse or scrip. I take it for granted that your Lordship will mention me to Mr. Secretary Trenchard, if you think anything of this kind proper for me. I wish I may part with these chimeras for the solid blessing of being near my patron

<sup>1</sup> Longleat MSS., iii, 8.

and protector in England. . . . I should like that climate or employment preferably to any other, in which I might tend my thoughts and studies so to my dear Lord Buckhurst's future improvement, as by it ever to testify to all the world the mighty obligation I owe his father."<sup>1</sup>

However gratified he may have been by these sentiments, the earl obtained for his friend neither a legation nor a berth at home. Prior, in fact, remained where he was; and remained under conditions which one cannot be surprised that he found trying. Lord Falkland was in due course appointed to succeed Dursley; but until he should take up his appointment, the secretary must do the minister's work. The latter was apparently in no hurry. "I have only a verbal order to stay here till my Lord Falkland comes over," Prior wrote to Dorset more than seven months after his old chief's resignation, "so they have made me a minister without one syllable of a commission to act by; and ordered me to receive all their letters without one penny of money to pay their postage."<sup>2</sup> When these words were written Falkland already lay dead of the small-pox, and a new vista of underpaid work and responsibility opened before the unfortunate poet.

Later on, to stray a little from the chronological sequence of events, Prior was reported to have stepped into a more intimate office vacated by the deceased diplomatist. One summer's day in 1699, when he and the dowager viscountess both happened to be in Paris, *The Post-Boy* newsheet contained the following announcement: "We hear Mr. Prior, who is secretary to the embassy in France, is married to my Lady Faulkland,

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

who is said to be worth £500,000 sterling." Prior's comments on this report were more characteristic than polite. Nevertheless, the story spread, and the lady took offence. "I had forgot to tell you," Matt wrote to Lord Jersey, "that my widow was scandalized at her being married to me by all the gazettes in Europe. She is gone for England rude as a bear, and mad as hot weather can make her." "My widow is run away like Medea in *Thésée* in great violence and heat," he told the same correspondent a few days later. The incensed dame made her way to London, where she quickly found consolation in the criticism of Lady Jersey's wardrobe. "Your widow is come," wrote Jersey, "and I believe has ventured her pretty person in the dust of London, for I hear that some of the women have seen her. She says my Lady Jersey is not dressed in the fashion, but 'I am right,' she cries, meaning her own person. Pray desire my Lady Sandwich to make haste over to befriend my Lady Jersey, for your widow says she has neither *mantoue*, petticoat, *commode*, nor anything in fashion. Judge what a mortification that is for a lady so newly come from France."<sup>1</sup>

But to return to graver matters. After Falkland's death, Prior's position at the Hague remained much what it had been since Dursley's resignation. It was, however, officially recognised. "His Majesty thinks fit," wrote William Blathwayt, Secretary at War and the King's personal friend, to the Duke of Shrewsbury, principal Secretary of State, "that Mr. Prior, my Lord Dursley's secretary, who has been always very careful in that station, may be continued as the English secretary, with the usual allowance of 20s. *per diem*, he having, besides other business, the trouble of giving out passports

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 342, 348, 351, 358, cf. 354, 363.

and examining all unknown persons that desire to go for England.”<sup>1</sup>

Prior was destined to be in charge of English affairs at the Hague for rather more than a year. For the holder of such an office, £1 a day was not a liberal salary. He was, it is true, to have a further allowance for “reasonable extraordinaries”; but this was an unsatisfactory concession, for such supplementary payments were, owing to the embarrassment of the Treasury, only too liable to indefinite postponement. Meanwhile current expenses had to be met from the secretary’s own pocket. Postage alone cost him from £8 to £10 weekly: in one exceptionally heavy morning he spent 136 guilders. The authorities at home, he complained, “wonder that a secretary should be obliged to pay the same postage as an envoy.” When he received his appointment he had about £200 in hand, with no immediate prospect of any more. It is hardly surprising if his letters have an importunate note.

“You are sure to be again plagued with me,” he writes to Vernon, “because you obliged me yesterday, as with a common beggar, because you relieved him last time you met him in the street. Mr. Blathwayt has (you know) recommended me by letter to the Pensioner; I have recourse to the States as his Majesty’s secretary, and as such pay sometimes above a hundred guilders a week for letters. So far all is well, but you remember what Isaac said: *Here is the fire and the wood, but where is the ram for the offering?* Pray don’t give me Abraham’s repartee; but be pleased to advise me, if I may not justly desire some money may be advanced, since in all these affairs Mr. Blathwayt turns me over to you.

“You will guess how far my stock will reach in these

<sup>1</sup> *Buccleuch MSS. (Montagu House), ii, 77.*

matters, it being (as you, my father, ought to know) about two hundred pounds, a sum which being lent the public will do his Majesty a world of service.

"I must desire you to advise and assist me in procuring a privy seal for my appointments from the 1st November, N.S., that I may dun the Treasury and bring in my extraordinaries already disbursed in form and manner as my forefathers."<sup>1</sup>

Matthew had an extraordinary faculty for acquiring "fathers." Indeed, one of the causes of his success in life was undoubtedly his knack of taking a parental feeling for granted in men who were merely his official superiors. The assumption, made by a master of suave and witty compliment, was hard to resist. James Vernon, now as Under-Secretary of State and later as Chief Secretary, invariably did his duty by his *soi-disant* son. In the present instance he saw that his allowance was made retrospective, so that he should not lose the money which he had been spending since Lord Dursley left the Hague.

But this did not satisfy Prior. He wanted an increase of his regular salary, and when William was at the Hague he made a bold bid for it.

"Whilst the Court was here," he told Shrewsbury, "I took the boldness to represent to my Lord Portland and Mr. Blathwayt that whenever his Majesty pleased to supply the ministry here, I had no other pretension than that of throwing myself in the packet-boat and making the best of my way for England; that, if I was to be left here, it was no way proper for me in this post to scramble at ordinaries with Switzers or French Protestants; that a little house this winter would be convenient in so cold a country as Holland; that it was not handsome for me to go to the Pensioner or

<sup>1</sup> Longleat MSS., iii, 25.

Secretaries on foot, whilst they sent their clerks back again in coaches; and that myself and servants could not subsist with any tolerable credit upon twenty shillings a day, which tallies and the change of money hardly bring beyond eighteen: that the public ministers, owning me with regard to the title I was commanded to take of the King of England's secretary, came to visit me, and that I could not go to them or to Court when I was too dirty."<sup>1</sup>

Portland admitted that Prior's claims "were rather founded on reason than vanity," and assured him that he would speak to the King while they were still at the Hague. But when the Court embarked for England, the expectant poet had heard nothing more of the matter, and was fain to lay his "inconsiderable business" before the Duke of Shrewsbury in the characteristic letter just given.

Prior's eloquence was not altogether in vain. Shrewsbury, Portland, Vernon and Blathwayt held solemn consultations over this important affair of state. They came to the conclusion that it would be easier to add the cost of a carriage and other such necessities to the secretary's extraordinaries, than to apply for an increase of salary. The King would pass such extra expenditure, provided it were not excessive, while he would probably refuse a formal application for a regular increment. After all, "£100 by a bill of extraordinaries is very like £100 by a privy seal."

The poet was disappointed; although, as he told Vernon, he had read Seneca too often to be discouraged. "I am too old to cry for a coach, and too young to have a real want of one."

"*Quando id quod velis non possis, velis id quod possis,*"

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

he goes on : " to show you I am not out of humour, I remember that £100 in a bill of extraordinaries is very like £100 by a privy seal. I hope, therefore, a coach, to be hired when I have business, may be allowed ; else, take five gilders from ten gilders and there remain but five, and consequently I must fast those days in which I give in memorials or pay visits. The small equipage of three rascals may come in likewise, and the house-rent for reasons not unlike the former."<sup>1</sup>

In a letter to Sir William Trumbull, at this time a Commissioner of the Treasury, and soon to be Secretary of State, he paints a telling, perhaps a heightened, picture of his condition.

" Necessity, Sir, has as little manners as it has law ; and when one is really starving, 'tis in vain to be told one is impertinent. Hitherto I have borrowed and done pretty well : those who lent me money and are not yet paid have had the trouble on't, but for want of more such civil persons I begin to be a little troubled myself. There is a great correspondence between the stomach and the heart : one is out of humour commonly when one is hungry ; and it is time to think what friends I have at Whitehall when Famine sits triumphant on the cheeks of my two footmen and the ribs of my two horses. You will be pleased to take this into your consideration, when Mr. Powys presents your Lordship my extraordinaries."<sup>2</sup>

Trumbull was a man of kindly temper and a friend of poets. He was in a measure responsible both for Dryden's translation of Virgil and for Pope's of Homer. But he was not able to do much for Prior in the troublesome matter of his extraordinaries, payment whereof

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.



was delayed in a manner more than annoying to an impecunious civil servant. For money was scarce, and ministers inclined to be parsimonious in all but military expenditure. Even Vernon, well disposed as he was, cavilled at the sum, £196 5s., which the secretary had spent on putting himself, his servants, his house and his coach into mourning for the Queen. He caused the item to be struck out of the bill wherein Matt had inserted it, and to be held over until the next quarter. Still, before the end of the previous year, Prior, as he confessed to Lord Lexington, had had enough from the Treasury to keep him from starvation until towards April; upon which he made so good a figure that everybody took him for a resident minister, and two or three holders of that rank were "dupes enough" to invite him to dinner.

The subject of ways and means is sometimes considered a sordid one; but its treatment can hardly be avoided here, for it touched Prior closely all his life and had an unmistakable effect on his character. The poet's private life, with its financial troubles and obscure amours, is a subject almost worthy of Balzac.

One other letter, concerned to some extent with money, must be given at length for the invaluable revelation it affords of the writer's personality, his tastes and ambitions and points of view. Prior's letters, however official their theme, rarely lack a personal touch, and he was on familiar terms with the greatest ministers of state. But his apparent frankness was hardly ever quite ingenuous. It was nearly always meant to serve the immediate end of flattering his influential correspondents and the ultimate end of benefiting himself. He had, however, a certain number of friends nearer his own rank, to whom he could reveal his thoughts and relieve his mind

without ulterior motive. One of these was George Stepney, the recipient of the following letter ; a man whose career was not dissimilar to Prior's. They had been contemporaries at Westminster and Cambridge. In connection with their friendship at the university Matt tells a characteristic story. " Many years ago, to Mrs. Stepney when I paid her a visit and had left her son at Cambridge, she asking me how he did and if he did not drink, I said he was very well and drank sometimes moderately. She urged, and desired me to tell truth. ' Mr. Prior, you are constantly with him, and I can believe you, did you never see him drunk in your life ? ' Answer : ' No, indeed, madam, for I was always drunk before him.' " <sup>1</sup> Stepney called himself a poet, though without much justification. As a diplomatist he was more evenly matched with his friend, who was on more than one occasion his rival. When Prior wrote to him in December, 1694, he was, though accredited to a German Court, for the moment in London.

" I have yours of this day sennight," the letters goes, " and am admiring that people who talk of £5 a day, then £4, now £400 equipage, and now nothing, in your case, should be so regularly resolved in mine as not to help me because they want a precedent : they have all sorts of weapons, I see, and keep us, as you advised me to keep my virago, at arm's length : and we must e'en arm ourselves in the apostle's magazine with the helmet of patience and the sword of faith. There is certainly nothing more irregular than the last proposal of £200 in a lump : but that is an objection that I ought not to start, but that we are talking only of examples and precedents ; and I think Mr. Blathwayt's advice may be our *pis-aller*, though I see no harm in t'other, as Fascio said of his pupils going

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxi, f. 136d.

to church. Believe me Shephard knows no more of my Lord Dorset's mind than he does of your negotiation, and would offer the £100 a year as liberally to Ben Conway, whom he never saw but once, as to me whom he has known this eighteen year. The gravity of his follies is insufferable, and he wants a tutor more than my Lord Buckhurst. I thought you were not such a stranger in Israel as to fancy he expects to be believed : but I forget you have been in a country where all the *beaux* have such faces and *mines*, and the privy councillors are all drunk by three after dinner.

" I am well enough affected to a seat in the office, *i.e.*, in case our projects abroad fail, to have it promised that I may have the offer, rather than, having no provision here if a minister should be sent, to be obliged to make the campaign with Mr. B———; but I had much rather have Ratisbon, and consequently be in state to join Lord Lexington *en cas de besoin*, which you know answers to the plan we propose to ourselves of making our forces joined so formidable in the Empire. However, I say, from a seat in the office one may leap abroad after having learnt the routine, and we have precedents of this matter from my Lord Arlington to father Vernon.

" Shwinfort is in the right of it to fancy himself fit for an employment of which he wants the emoluments. Hughes, you will find, has just the same sentiments ; 'tis all a game, Catt, and we that are partners are rather to hold up our cards than blame our adversaries for peeping into our hands, or endeavouring to trump the cards we hope to make our tricks by. I do not find that we are drawing near a peace, so possibly they will not leave me a year only upon the questions *an ?* and *quomodo ?* at Ratisbon. You do well to stop interlopers, however, and I see you distinguish my interests no

otherwise from your own than by embracing them with more zeal. Pray take your leave of our friends in Channel Row and of Lord Dorset. Maybe he may send me something to begin housekeeping. See Lady Orrery, too, and desire to know if I may be serviceable to her in anything here. Ollinda is miraculously recovered from folly, and (if one may believe her scrawl) resolves to be *resnabel*. I am perfectly friends with her: how easily we pardon those we love! and count that for certain which we have a mind to hope! and if it were not for the dear deceit, who would desire life and *brigue* foreign employments, when at home one may find twenty ready ways of dying? or who would be vexed about extraordinaries, whilst arsenic is but ninepence an ounce, and a rope costs but three halfpence?"<sup>1</sup>

The tone of cynicism in which Prior often spoke of his duties did not prevent his performing them with industry and ability. Trumbull told him that he had "found the secret of joining two things generally thought incompatible, poetry and business, and both in perfection." William III was not given to making pretty phrases, but he was consistently satisfied with the secretary's services. At the Hague he must conduct any business which was on foot between his government and the Grand Pensionary of Holland, and report such useful intelligence as came his way. He had to sign and examine passports, and to frustrate those who tried to sail for England without them. In those days of war and intrigue, the place swarmed with doubtful characters, and Prior was constantly on the trail of Jacobite plots, examining spies, endeavouring to unravel cyphers and to coax invisible ink to legibility. His letters on these matters make curious reading, but serve the ends of

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 37.

history rather than of biography. Whoever would tell the intimate story of Jacobitism must take account of them.

In May, 1695, William III was at the Hague, and Prior, debts amounting to £400 notwithstanding, was able to "saunter at Court like other mortals, and meet the King in the Forehant in my own coach to show him something for his money." Lord Villiers was at this time appointed envoy extraordinary to the States General and plenipotentiary at the congress of allies at the Hague. Ever since the Queen's death Prior had expected this event, and had once more grown anxious as to his own future. He wrote to Charles Montagu, now Chancellor of the Exchequer and one of the most eminent men in England, gracefully reminding him of old days. "We must have a vigilant eye," he says. "I call it 'we,' for you, sir, have always regarded my interest as if it were your own; and when I consider that you have taken your poor neighbour and made a friend of him, and solicited for that friend as if he had been your brother, I doubt not but you will have the reward you deserve (though a good while hence) in the Court of Heaven; and I the credentials I do not deserve to some court or republic a little nearer."<sup>1</sup> He also wrote to Portland and Dorset. He wanted a residency, either at Ratisbon or else at Florence, Venice or one of the northern courts. "*Omne solum forti patria est.*" To Ratisbon, indeed, there seemed considerable prospect of his being sent. The King, however, decided that he was to stay where he was, at any rate until Lord Villiers was settled. Meanwhile there came a rumour that Stepney was perhaps going to Ratisbon, in which case Prior would be "*le ministre de la fortune, et le très humble serviteur des*

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

*événements.*" He was ready to apply for Berlin, or to purchase Veneroni's Grammar and perfect his Italian with a view to Florence.

It must be understood that in some of these places England had, at the moment, no representative at all. Nor was it certain that any was to be sent. Ratisbon itself was a case in point. The chances of Stepney and Prior depended not only on their own suitability to the post, but on whether the post itself should be filled. As a matter of fact, William decided that it should remain empty. "After having hoped, feared, been promised, and (which is worst) congratulated for Ratisbon, the King thinks there is not enough for a minister to do there," the poet wrote to Keppel, with due apologies for bothering a man who was engaged on the task of helping to retake Namur from the French. Then he enlarged on William's virtues and his own requirements and potentialities.

"'Tis true his Majesty knows best, for he is as evidently the most experienced man of our age as he is the best prince ; and if he had been born a private man, he would have made a greater ambassador than any state ever employed ; yet I have one objection that could puzzle him, which is that though Ratisbon may not want a resident, his secretary at the Hague will soon want a residence ; and though his Majesty have small use for a scribbling servant, I have great occasion for the bounty of a royal master. Wherever he pleases to send me, I am ready to go ; where, if there be not much business, I shall apply myself to those studies that may make me capable of doing his business when there is any ; and when there is nothing to be written for his service in prose, I will write his conquests and glories in verse. A resident or envoy may in some small time be sent to Venice, another to Florence : be it at either of these two

places, at Ratisbon, Berlin (where, may be, his Majesty may send rather a resident than an envoy), at Stockholm, Copenhagen or even Moscow, it is well, provided I may serve my King, my hero and my master ; but it is a sad reflection for me to think of going home as if I were disgraced, after having served him five years with some credit, and spent my little all in order to my being fit for something hereafter ; and I take the boldness to protest to you I cannot think of returning to my college, and being useless to my country, to make declarations and theses to doting divines there, having drawn up memorials to the States General in the name of the greatest king in Europe. You will be pleased to pardon the freedom of my letter, and to help me in this conjuncture of my fortune.”<sup>1</sup>

What attention Keppel paid to this petition is not recorded ; but that he was the poet’s very good friend Prior subsequently acknowledged.

Although one sentence of Matt’s letter proved prophetic, and he was soon celebrating William’s “ conquests and glories ” in the brilliant burlesque *Ballad on the Taking of Namur*—showing thereby that anxiety had not affected his wit—he was neither to represent his sovereign in one of the lesser Courts of Europe nor to be laid on the shelf at home. His life at the Hague, on the other hand, was about to enter a new phase. So agreeable and indispensable had he made himself to the new envoy, that at Lord Villiers’s request, the termination of his secretaryship was indefinitely postponed ; “ which I take to be much better,” he told Vernon, “ than to saunter in the Court of Request and interpret votes to Blancard, or be squired by that mirror of knighthood, Sir Fleetwood, through every tavern from Fish Street

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 60, 61.

Hill to the Cockpit." The matter was decided, however, in the sportive month of October, and he had to wait for his official appointment until the Secretaries of State could spare time from their racehorses and hunters. But he and George Stepney, who happened to be at the Hague and was also expecting instructions, amused themselves together by walking "as gravely all day as if they had business" and drinking healths at night.

Another great effort was also made to get his salary of £1 a day doubled, but once more the King proved inexorable. The shadowy "extraordinaries" were, however, given the more definite form of an additional allowance not exceeding twenty shillings daily.

Prior was soon to find that the nominal amount of his allowance, whether ordinary or extraordinary, was immaterial. In 1696 Charles Montagu, to whose financial genius we owe the Bank of England and the National Debt, began a most necessary and beneficial work, the reform of the currency. Like most drastic remedies, however excellent their results, this was extremely painful in its uncompleted stages. As the bad old coin was called in, and the new mintage found its gradual way into circulation, there was literally a money famine. Coin of the realm was not to be had. No one would suffer more keenly than a minor servant of the Crown, who was not even in a position to dun the Treasury in person. Prior, embarrassed already, nearly starved. His exchequer tallies could only be negotiated at a loss of 30 or even 45 per cent. His aunt could not help him. At one time his worldly possessions amounted to two pistoles. He had to pawn the chain and medal which the States had given him. His tradesmen, as is the way of their kind, got wind of his straits. "I have every morning," he told Montagu, the author of his misfortunes, "*a levée*



(God be thanked for the respite of Sunday) of postmen, stationers, tailors, cooks and wine-merchants who have not been paid since last December." This was in September. But he was philosophical as ever, ready to console himself with "a scrap or two of Horace," his never-failing friend. "Some miracle may possibly mollify the hearts of the Treasury that we may get a little ready money," he suggested hopefully to Richard Powys, a minor official of that department, who had direct charge of his affairs. "It must be a miracle indeed," replied Powys.

Meanwhile there was public business afoot which would give Prior something to think about besides his personal discomforts.

## CHAPTER III

### THE TREATY OF RYSWICK. IMPRESSIONS IN PARIS

PRIOR was undoubtedly a good civil servant. Sir William Trumbull's compliments may have been exaggerated, but Pope's verdict of "nothing out of verse" was totally untrue. He was esteemed by a King who was not prone to enthusiasm, and by a number of very able politicians. A few years later he was to win equal confidence from men whose ideas were the antithesis of those of Vernon and Montagu. This may not say much for Matthew's political stability, but it says a good deal for his efficiency. Personal charm and a persuasive pen may have helped him, but the work he was given to do required more practical qualities. Nor did he fail his employers. His capacity is manifest.

He was keen as well as capable. His constant requests for a residency were not urged by the desire of gain alone. "Fortune may starve my body if she pleases, but shall never lessen my ambition," he told Shrewsbury. "I had rather be thought a good Englishman than the best poet or greatest scholar that ever wrote," was another of his sayings. Perhaps he was too much the child of his time to have been quite sincere in this pious sentiment. Nevertheless, he liked to earn what his country gave him, even though it were an irregular and insufficient wage. After the arrival of Lord Villiers at the Hague, the secretary's labours became too light for him. He had time to go to Amsterdam with Charles Berkeley, the son of Lord Dursley, his old chief; to make inquiries, for the gratification of his friends' curiosity, about the Princess of Brandenburg, whom William III was supposed

to be going to marry ; and doubtless for even less profitable occupations. " I have my appointments and lie fallow," he said. He was discontented, and began once more to build castles in Ratisbon. When, therefore, a treaty between the warring powers was in prospect, and there was talk of the appointment of delegates and of a secretary to the delegates, he once more grew importunate for employment.

By the autumn of 1696 everybody was weary of the war. The loss of Namur had been a terrible blow to Louis, while the defection of Savoy had seriously weakened the Allies. The treasuries of England and France were equally empty. Louis had said that he who held the last gold piece would win, but the game of " beggar my neighbour " had proved too expensive for either player.

In September " guesses and wagers concerning a peace " were rife at the Hague, where preliminary conversations were being held between Caillières, the French envoy, and the representatives of the Allies, with a view to determining a basis for the negotiations. The great stumbling-block was the refusal of Louis to recognise William III as King of England. The French king was still hoping for a Jacobite reaction. But the firmness displayed by the Commons in the great debate of 20th October, so glowingly described by Macaulay, disabused him of that illusion ; and Caillières was at length instructed to concede the essential point. As Villiers's secretary, it was the privilege of Matthew Prior to send the glad tidings of this concession into England. On 1st December he wrote to Dorset, Vernon and Trumbull. Vernon's answer, dated a week later, describes the great effect which the news had on the Commons.

" I received yesterday your letter of the 1-11 inst.

It could not have come more *à propos*, for I received it just before the House went into a committee upon the state of the nation. I happened to tell my next neighbour the good news it brought, and it ran round the House like fire in stubble, and had a very good influence in restraining people from running into the peevish propositions that some had prepared for that day. It was so well received and so little expected that the gentlemen who suspected they should be disappointed by it would have had it pass for a contrivance started up to serve a turn, but your name and credit passed for authentic among them, and I think it is owing to you that we avoided a good deal of peevishness at that time; but after all I find we must not so depend upon a treaty as not to be upon our guard against what the enemy is designing both by sea and land.”<sup>1</sup>

This last remark was occasioned by Prior’s warning that France was making preparations on the coasts of Normandy and Brittany, and sending troops into Burgundy and Lorraine and along the Rhine. The preliminaries in fact were far from being settled. Many points of discord, which it is unnecessary to particularise here, had to be resolved before the plenipotentiaries could get to the main business. Still, Louis’ concession had advanced matters considerably. Its immediate sequel was the nomination of the three plenipotentiaries. They were the Earl of Pembroke, Lord Villiers and Sir Joseph Williamson. Early in the new year Matthew Prior was appointed their secretary.

Before this happy event, he had lived through four months of uncertainty. He had written betimes to the Duke of Shrewsbury, urging his claims. His first letter on the subject, dated 25th August, has an additional

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 97.

interest as exemplifying the scepticism which six years of diplomatic business had taught the poet, and the rather brutal hostility which in his earlier years was his habitual attitude towards the *Grand Monarque*.

"My Lord Villiers informs your Grace what passed yesterday at the Congress. Our small German ministers are, I think, in their hearts angry at this overture, for they love subsidies better than treaties, and would prolong the war as long as we can pay for it. The Imperial ministers, how great a mind soever they may have for a peace, are willing to seem to be courted to it.

"We have news these two last posts that the King of France has been very ill; the French post this morning confirms it. He has had a swelling in his neck, which is a kind of pestilential sore, for which he has been blistered and scarified, and is not yet out of danger. We pray very heartily for his going off, and have a great mind to have our treaty signed by Louis the 15th.

"Since everybody is thinking of his own pretensions and interests in this conjuncture, I hope your Grace will pardon me troubling you even with mine. I have been six years here, and from the title of his Majesty's secretary I seem to have a kind of right by prescription to be secretary of the embassy when it shall be named, which in all probability will be very suddenly. For this I must recommend myself to your Grace's goodness; and I hope to the obligations you have been pleased already to lay on me, your Grace will add this one more of naming me to his Majesty on this occasion, that I may go on with credit to receive your Grace's commands, and continue to own my happiness to your favour."<sup>1</sup>

The Duke thought Prior's claim a just one, and wrote to Blathwayt to put it before the King, who seemed

<sup>1</sup> *Buccleuch MSS. (Montagu House)*, ii, 391.

equally well disposed. William was now at Loo; so was the poet, "briguig and flattering," as he told Lexington, and hunting all day. From Loo he went in the royal train to Cleves on a visit to the Elector of Brandenburg, whose daughter William was perhaps to marry. The occasion provoked Matt's malicious wit.

"We are just come from our Cleves journey," he told Shrewsbury. "Your Grace will give me leave to trouble you with my remarks; 'tis a privilege all travellers take, from Bishop Burnett to myself. The Elector received the King very respectfully at the river-side, and they two came back in one coach, the Duke of Zell and the Electoral Prince in another. These two last had doubtless very proper discourse, since one of them is seven years old, and the t'other is seventy-two. In the Electrice's apartment, after they had talked about an hour standing, the King, the Electrice, and the Duke of Zell went to ombre for five good hours; the King had an armed chair, the Duke of Zell an ordinary one, and she sat upon the bed.

"The Electrice has a face not unlike our poor Queen, upon Queen Dowager's body. She loves to talk, and is civil to all the world. Few of the women are handsome, and all ill-dressed, in old-fashioned, stiff-bodied gowns, too big for them, with their breasts and shoulders naked. The Princess is not ugly, but disagreeable; a tall miss at a boarding school, with a scraggy, lean neck; very pale, and a great lover, I fancy, of chalk and tobacco-pipes; nobody can tell if it will be a match or no, but as much as one could guess he does not much dislike her. She seems very good and humble, but God knows if that proceeds from her virtue or her ignorance.

"The King supped and dined next day with the Electrice and Princess. The Elector had a table on his

own side, where were as many of the best English as it would hold. There was a great deal of good meat and ill wine for everybody else, but they filled it in such mighty glasses, and it came about so fast, that people grew drunk before they had half dined.

“ Our two favourites have had a quarrel ; in coming home Kappel (*sic*), being heated with wine and heedless, made his coachman drive before my Lord Portland, who was in one of the Duke of Zell’s coaches ; upon which Lord Portland said he would beat the coachman, who excusing himself upon his orders, my Lord Portland said whoever gave those orders was an impertinent puppy, or some such words. The ground of the quarrel began, I believe, at Cleves ; my Lord Portland was most of the time with the Elector and the ministers, and Mons. Keppel sat by the King, which was a distinction which I believe fretted the t’other’s heart.”<sup>1</sup>

It is rather curious that whereas in September Prior considered his secretaryship a settled thing, as time went on he grew far less confident. Much depended on who the plenipotentiaries were to be. Someone might be appointed who knew not the poet but had a friend or dependent of his own to advance. Lord Lexington was mentioned, but he would probably have been for Prior. Sir William Trumbull, however, was thought to favour John Ellis, an understrapper at Whitehall, while Lord Romney would probably have wanted Daniel Pulteney. The appointments actually made were fortunate for Prior. Pembroke had always been his friend. Villiers, already his chief, liked and trusted him and was regarded by the poet with a warm and sincere affection. Sir Joseph Williamson was a stranger ; but Prior wrote promptly to secure his interest, and the veteran diplomatist could

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

scarcely have objected to one who was so highly esteemed not only by his two colleagues, but by the principal Secretary of State and the King himself.

So Prior was made secretary, his appointment dating from 27th February, 1697. The next point to be decided was the scene of his labours. Maastricht, Nimeguen and Breda were the places suggested by the Allies. The King's house at Ryswick, as all the world knows, was finally chosen. The representatives of the Allies lay at the Hague, those of France at Delft. So Prior did not have to move himself or his belongings. Before business began, however, he paid a short visit to England (his first since he had left it with Lord Dursley), arriving 12th January and leaving 6th March.

One of the things he did there was apparently to order plate, "six large candlesticks, a snuffer-pan and snuffers, and a silver standish," for the embassy. Back at the Hague, he was very busy with preparations. In April he was ill, "one eye being civilly put out by a defluxion, and the other weeping till it comes again, and the arm in a scarf, having let blood for abatement of salt humours."<sup>1</sup> He was better in time for the congress; though "I cannot boast of my eyes," he wrote. "I have a great respect for the god of love, but am not aspiring to divinity: a blind boy may turn Cupid; but at thirty, if the mischance falls on one, I know nothing but singing psalms upon Fleet Bridge that remains for one."<sup>2</sup>

On 28th April, the day on which the proceedings opened, Villiers kissed the King's hand as one of the three Lords Justices of Ireland. He took the opportunity of recommending Prior for the office of chief secretary to himself and his colleagues. Three weeks or so later,

<sup>1</sup> *Lexington Papers*, p. 253.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.



after the usual canvassing among influential friends, the appointment was made. But the story of the Irish secretaryship must be told in another place.

"Half way between Delft and the Hague," writes Macaulay, "is a village named Ryswick; and near it then stood, in a rectangular garden, which was bounded by straight canals, and divided into formal woods, flower beds, and melon beds, a seat of the Princes of Orange. The house seemed to have been built expressly for the accommodation of such a set of diplomatists as were to meet there. In the centre was a large hall painted by Honthorst. On the right hand and on the left were wings exactly corresponding to each other. Each wing was accessible by its own bridge, its own gate, and its own avenue. One wing was assigned to the Allies, the other to the French, the hall in the centre to the mediator."

Such was the house at which the ambassadors assembled for the first time on that May afternoon, Mr. Secretary Prior arriving in the second English coach. It was to be the scene of their deliberations for four months.

An account of those deliberations does not appertain to this narrative; for after all Prior was only a minor participant therein, with no influence on their course. His duty was to record the decisions of his masters, to submit their suggestions to the mediator, and to keep the authorities at home informed of their progress. All this he found very absorbing and performed with admirable industry. His letters, and the journal which he kept throughout the negotiations, testify to his secretarial efficiency; but as personal documents they are unusually dull. Prior had little time for those flights in which he was accustomed to indulge even in his official correspondence, and except for occasional gibes at the

protracted chicanery of the diplomatists, he kept himself discreetly in the background.

On 9th September, or rather in the small hours of the following morning, the treaties between France on the one hand, and England, Spain and the United Provinces on the other were signed at Ryswick. Prior was already on his way to England in a vessel he had hired for the purpose. On the afternoon of the 12th he landed at Lowestoft—"Lastof " he calls it in his journal—and twenty-four hours later was at Whitehall.<sup>1</sup> He delivered the ambassadors' letter and a copy of the treaty to Vernon, and then went a-visiting. The King, of course, was away, for there had been no cessation of hostilities during the congress. England was under the care of the usual bevy of Lords Justices, and it was to these, or such of them as were in town, that Matthew paid his respects. The news he brought was received with enthusiasm, for a peace was sadly needed, and the peace arranged at Ryswick was on the whole a victory for England. "That noble nation from whence I came are so overjoyed at the peace that they are all fit for Bedlam," Prior told Lexington, adding that the Dutch were "more soberly joyful." He received a present of 200 guineas from the secret service money, and on 15th September was sent back to Holland in the *Centurion* man-of-war. Business at the Hague was not quite finished; the treaty as between France and the

<sup>1</sup> On 14th September Henry Guy (of whom we have heard before in connection with Prior) somewhat tardily wrote to Robert Harley: "Mr. Prior, secretary to the embassy of England, is on the road, and expected every minute with the treaty sent to the Lords Justices to prepare the instrument of ratification" [*Portland MSS.*, iii, 587]. On 23rd September someone else wrote to Harley: "It is said here that Mr. Prior has gone back to rectify an error and to bring with him the original treaty instead of a copy, but others say the omission of the warrant hindered the Broad Seal from ratifying" [*Ibid.*, 588]. These rumours are not confirmed by Prior's journal. He was, however, blamed for coming to England with an incomplete copy of the treaty [*Vernon Papers*, i, 439].

Empire had still to be signed, and though this did not directly concern the English, there were various supplementary points to be settled. Then complimentary visits had to be exchanged with the French plenipotentiaries ; functions which Prior professed to find more wearisome than the negotiations themselves.

By the end of October, however, the secretary was free, and prepared to leave the Hague for good. The etiquette of his departure gave him some anxiety. He was always sensitive about such details.

" By a letter from you to the Pensioner in his Majesty's name, dated the 16th of June, 1694," he wrote to William Blathwayt, " I was recommended to the States as his Majesty's secretary, and have ever since been used by them with all kindness : the favour I desire of you is to move his Majesty that you may by his order write a like letter to the Pensioner or President of the week, when his Majesty pleases that I should leave Holland, that I may have occasion to take leave and thank them for their favours ; which is but just to go off as I came on, and would let the States see I am not wholly forgotten by my master, and entitle me to a medal." <sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of November Villiers, who had been created Earl of Jersey for his share in the peace negotiations, went to meet William III at Zuylestein. Matt waited at the Hague till the King should arrive there, intending to sail home with his masters. Meanwhile he wrote a letter to Lord Townshend, which shows that he was recovering from the oppressive solemnity of Ryswick.

" What a cursed thing, my Lord, is this ! a secretary to be writing till midnight without having time to say one word to those whom he respects most or loves best.

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 183.

No matter ; I shall see you within this fortnight, and in that thought adieu all the melancholy reflections that can be inspired by a huge bundle of papers without any method, or an ambassador without anything but method !

Who would (says Dryden) drink this draught of life  
 Blended with bitter woes and tedious strife,  
 But that an angel in some lucky hour  
 Does healing drops into the goblet pour ?  
 When wearied I would spill the baleful cup,  
 Some sparkling bubble of delight springs up.  
 My sovereign or my friend was heard to tell  
 I served him faithfully, or loved him well :  
 Then easy hope deceives my flattered taste,  
 One joy atones ten thousand evils past ;  
 New scenes of thought I from this model frame,  
 Consent to live that I my part may claim  
 In Townshend's friendship or in William's fame.

" I *bronche* [stumble], i' faith, and can no more rise in poetry than B—— in prose. I hope the Hoop in Fish Street will give me some spirits, and cure an ill habit of mind contracted by a thick air of conversation. Dr. Sherrard, you know, said I had no need of anti-scorbutics to help my eyes : may be he will think I have no occasion for good company to cure my ideas. I'll try so good a dose of it by his favour as soon as I get to England as may set me right for a year or two at least. In the meantime I thank you for Dr. English's letter to me and will not say one word how very much I love you, or which is rarer, how very much you deserve to be loved, till I see you. *Amo te : fac me amas. Vale.*"<sup>1</sup>

So Prior left the Dutch town which had been his home for so many years. " Good Vandergoes and his provident Vrow " would no longer have the pleasure of envying " the Englishen Heer Secretaris " as he drove through

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

their streets with his Chloe up beside him. Nor was London and its congenial society to know him for many weeks. Naturally he expected to be sent to Dublin, where he had been secretary by deputy for half a year. But another and more amusing fate was in store for him.

William had decided to celebrate the peace by sending his old friend, the Earl of Portland, to Versailles. The embassy was one of special magnificence, worthy of its occasion and destination. It was worthy also of the descriptive powers of Macaulay. "Twelve men of honourable birth and ample fortune, some of whom afterwards filled high offices in the State, attended the mission at their own charge. Each of them had his own carriage, his own horses, and his own train of servants. Two less wealthy persons, who, in different ways, attained great note in literature, were of the company. Rapin, whose history of England might have been found, a century ago, in every library, was the preceptor of the ambassador's eldest son, Lord Woodstock. Prior was Secretary of Legation."

The great historian then proceeds to relate a story for which he disdains to give his authority. Prior's "quick parts, his industry, his politeness, and his perfect knowledge of the French language, marked him out as eminently fitted for diplomatic employment." So much we knew. "He had, however, found much difficulty in overcoming an odd prejudice which his chief had conceived against him. Portland, with good natural abilities and great expertness in business, was no scholar. He had probably never read an English book; but he had a general notion, unhappily but too well founded, that the wits and poets who congregated at Will's were a most profane and licentious set; and, being himself a man of orthodox opinions and regular life, he was

not disposed to give his confidence to one whom he supposed to be a ribald scoffer. Prior, with much address, and perhaps with the help of a little hypocrisy, completely removed this unfavourable impression. He talked on serious subjects, quoted the New Testament appositely, vindicated Hammond from the charge of popery, and, by way of a decisive blow, gave the definition of a true Church from the nineteenth Article. Portland stared at him. 'I am glad, Mr. Prior, to find you so good a Christian. I was afraid that you were an atheist.' 'An atheist, my good lord!' cried Prior. 'What could lead your lordship to entertain such a suspicion?' 'Why,' said Portland, 'I knew that you were a poet; and I took it for granted that you did not believe in God.' 'My lord,' said the wit, 'you do us poets the greatest injustice. Of all people we are the farthest from atheism. For the atheists do not even worship the true God, whom the rest of mankind acknowledge; and we are always invoking and hymning false gods whom everybody else has renounced.' This jest will be perfectly intelligible to all who remember the eternally recurring allusions to Venus and Minerva, Mars, Cupid and Apollo, which were meant to be the ornaments, and are the blemishes, of Prior's compositions. But Portland was much puzzled. However, he declared himself satisfied; and the young diplomatist withdrew, laughing to think with how little learning a man might shine in courts, lead armies, negotiate treaties, obtain a coronet and a garter, and leave a fortune of half a million." This story is given for what it is worth. It is at any rate *ben trovato*.

The ceremonial character of the earl's embassy afforded Prior plenty of opportunity—or rather obliged him—to study French society at close quarters. As, moreover, many of Portland's engagements were of too private

a nature to admit of the presence even of his trusted secretary, the latter had a good deal of time to spend in his own way. "I have little more to do," he wrote, "than to make a leg thrice a day for my chocolate, my dinner, and my supper, and run about the rest of my time as fast as two lean nags can carry me like Bartholomew Coates to gape or to buy, and pay my respects to rare company, monks, poets, tailors, academicians, nuns, seamstresses, booksellers and players." "In my gallooned coats and the hurry that attends my noble post I hardly know myself." He lived in the full swing of pleasure, as his friend Powys of the Treasury surmised. When he arrived in Paris, indeed, he was ill: "at death's door," by his own account. But he was soon well enough "to look after the ladies," though whether the nuns or the seamstresses, to quote from his own catalogue, claimed most of his attention does not appear. The *religieuse defroquée*, who "supplanted the nut-brown maid," was a later episode.

Prior, of course, was made for Paris. Its gaiety and culture alike appealed to him. He talked with Condé and Bossuet; he corresponded with the aged St. Evremond; and even the great Boileau, viceroy of the Muses, was gracious to his parodist. Nor is this surprising: for the Englishman was both witty and well-read, with a tongue apt alike for satire and for flattery. To Louis himself he proved *persona grata*. In an old note-book the poet has jotted down some of his answers to the king's gracious remarks; and though these have sadly lost their savour, for nothing is more evanescent than the savour of conversation, they serve to show on what easy terms the joiner's son stood with the proudest monarch in Christendom. Prior, however, was in no wise dazzled by this condescension. He was not even

moved by the common dictates of gratitude, and he is at his wittiest and most malicious in describing the grandeurs of Versailles and its master.

" Nous revinmes hier de Versailles," he wrote to Keppel (now Earl of Albemarle) towards the end of Portland's embassy, " et fûmes l'autre jour dans les jardins avec le Roy, qui promena my Lord par tout. Si c'étoit un compliment fait à my Lord par sa Majesté ou une ostentation de sa propre grandeur, qu'importe il ? Elle fit sçavoir à son Excellence qu'elle avoit inventé et ordonné tout, qu'elle en avoit dressé les plans, mis en diverses rencontres les architectes à la raison, et à force de dire cecy souvent sans avoir été contredit, à la fin je pense qu'elle commence à le croire. Monsieur étoit obligé de confirmer tout ce que son grand frère disoit, et une demi-douzaine de cordons-bleu y faisoit le chorus, et faisoit remarquer à nous autres combien *gracieux* étoit leur Roy chaque fois qu'il fit à quelqu'un de nous autres la moindre inclination de tête. *Gracieux*, par parenthèse, est le mot à la mode : un homme est *gracieux*, c'est à dire, honnête ; une femme est *gracieuse*, belle ; on chante, on mange et on joue *gracieusement*." <sup>3</sup>

However pleasant he might find the coffee-houses, Prior was bored, though amused, by the adulation, the buckram etiquette and the assertive piety at Court.

" Le Roy a beaucoup de santé pour un homme de soixante ans, et plus de vanité qu'une fille de seize," he had written in an earlier letter to Albemarle ; to whom he always wrote in French, and the language gave sparkle and edge to his pen. " On n'a qu'à voir sa maison pour en mépriser souverainement le maître : bas-relief, fresco, tableaux, tout représente Louis le Grand, et cela d'une manière si grossière que le Czar

<sup>3</sup> Longleat MSS., iii, 212.



y trouveroit à redire. Il ne sçauroit cracher dans aucun coin de ses appartements sans voir sa propre figure ou celle de son lieutenant le Soleil, et sans se trouver Héros et Demidieu en peinture. . . .”

A familiar anecdote may here be interjected. Being shown the series of pictures in which Le Brun and Vandermuhlen had celebrated Louis' victories, and being asked whether the like were to be seen at Kensington, Matt replied—"with spirit and propriety," says Macaulay—"The monuments of my master's actions are to be seen everywhere but in his own house." Prior himself has recorded a similar episode, or perhaps a more accurate version of the same story. "When at Marly they showed me the King's sieges and conquests painted by Vandermule: and amongst others Mons, taken in 1691, I asked if they had not the other part to that picture. 'Which?' said they. 'That,' I answered, '[in] which King William retook that place in 1695.'"<sup>1</sup> In the letter to Albemarle last quoted, having disposed of the King and his foibles, he proceeds to the rest of the royal house.

"Le Dauphin est à peu près notre Prince George, hormis que l'un ne baise que la Princesse, et l'autre toutes les filles de l'opera sans distinction. Monsieur est une petite marionnette d'une voix cassée, qui cause beaucoup et ne dit rien. Toute la cour est sombre et triste; la bigoterie et le ménage y règne à un point que les filles à genoux disent leur Paternoster dans les galeries comme dans un couvent, et les gardes du corps, mettant leurs armes à part, nouent des franges comme les filles en Angleterre. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

"The Court is so melancholy and bigot that the news of it is hardly worth sending," he told Lord Manchester.

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxi, f. 138.

<sup>2</sup> Longleat MSS., iii, 195.

“ That which makes most noise in it, and which would make more noise in any other court of Christendom, is the marriage of Madame Maintenon’s niece with the eldest son of the Duke de Noailles. Madam Maintenon received the compliments of the princesses and ladies on this occasion in a very extraordinary manner. She was in her bed ; the Duchess of Burgundy came into her chamber, had a chair set for her, but did not sit ; all which mummary was concerted beforehand ; and consequently the other ladies could not sit whilst the Duchess stood. Thus, my Lord, this woman is *je ne sçay quoy*, which everybody reasons of as he thinks good, and of whom nobody can determine what character she really has.”<sup>3</sup>

Prior was very much impressed with the power of Madame de Maintenon, who had of course been the King’s unacknowledged wife for many years. “ C’est prodigieux que le pouvoir de cette vieille gouvernante sur l’esprit de son pupil royal de soixante. Il n’ose rien faire sans elle, ni luy refuser tout ce qu’elle veut.” She is of more importance than Diana was at Ephesus. She governs Louis “ as absolutely as Roxalana did Solyman” ; while the King “ lives at Marly like an eastern monarch, making waterworks and planting melons, and leaves his bashas to ruin the land, provided they are constant in bringing in their tribute.” Fortunately this powerful woman was England’s friend, and, according to Matthew, the true author of the recent peace. Care for the King’s health, rather than any special kindness for his enemies, dictated her attitude—there is a poem on this theme attributed variously to Prior and to Dryden—but the cause need not be criticised when the results were the advantageous terms which William’s ambassadors had obtained at Ryswick.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

As for the rest of the French who came under the secretary's observation, they masked implacable enmity behind a show of civility. "These people are all the same, civil in appearance and hating us to hell at the bottom of their heart: they assure us one day of the continuance of their friendship, and tell King James next they will never forsake him or let him go further off than St. Germain. They have a great eye to their naval preparations, as well at Toulon as at Brest. There will be a review made at Compiègne this summer of about forty battalions of foot and 130 squadrons of horse and dragoons. They are constantly informed of the King of Spain's estate by extraordinary couriers, and, according to the best accounts we have, that prince cannot live many months."<sup>1</sup>

It was some time before the poet got sight of the royal exiles. Portland, of course, did not meet them, and found the French King's habit of entertaining them very embarrassing. Not infrequently he was obliged to absent himself from some function because he had learned that James was to be of the company. The manoeuvres of William's ambassador and William's predecessor furnish an exalted parallel to those of Box and Cox. Left in sole charge of English affairs at Paris, however, Prior became less discreet. In August, 1698, he went, though apparently not without qualms of conscience, to the christening of the Duke de Chartres' daughter at St. Cloud, where his old sovereign was also to be present. "I saw King James and his Queen," he wrote to Vernon, " (pray do not hang me for so doing), and there was nothing so odd as to see the Duke of Berwick and Lord Middleton traversing the gallery on one side, and I [*sic*] and Lord Reay, of the good Mackay

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

brood, on the other side, each looking on the other with an air of civility mixed with contempt. The gentlemen belonging to the Duke d'Orléans and Chartres were embarrassed enough to call him one moment *le Roy d'Angleterre* to them, and speak to me the next of *le Roy Jacques* : it was, as most human things are, a farce ridiculous enough.

"King James looks mighty old and worn, and stoops in his shoulders ; the Queen looks ill and melancholy ; their equipage is mighty ragged, and their horses are all as lean as Sancho's." <sup>1</sup>

He wrote in the same strain, accompanied by the same supplication, to Portland, who replied in his matter of fact way : "Je ne sçay si vous courés risque de la vie pour avoir veu le Roy Jaques, mais bien que j'ay ry de tout mon coeur de votre récit ; c'est la plus sotte chose du monde d'estre obligé de changer de ton et de style d'un bout de la chambre à l'autre." <sup>2</sup> In a letter to Charles Montagu, Prior develops, on rather brutal lines, his description of James's appearance. "*Vive Guillaume !* you never saw such a strange figure as the old bully is, lean, worn and riv'led, not unlike Neal the projector ; the Queen looks very melancholy, but otherwise well enough ; their equipages are all very ragged and contemptible." <sup>3</sup> It is not uninteresting to recall that these words were written by one who had composed a fulsome coronation poem in 1685 and was ere long to be suspected of Jacobitism. In 1698, however, he was proud to be one of "Bentinck's crew," as James called the friends of the Revolution.

After the arrival of a new ambassador in Paris, the secretary became duly careful not to compromise the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 264.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

dignity of his government. But he received accounts, vivid enough for transmission to England, of Louis' attentions to his guests. The satirist in him was amused, the civil servant annoyed, by the state of affairs. "Our friends at St. Germain shine extremely at Fontainebleau : all the court is made to Queen Mary ; everybody is at her toilette in the morning, from whence the King of France leads her to chapel : the two Kings and the Queen in the midst sit at the head of the table at dinner with equal marks of distinction and of sovereignty, and '*à boire pour le Roi d'Angleterre !*' ou '*pour la Reine*' is spoke as loud and with the same ceremony as '*pour le Roi*' when they mean their own King. It is really not a right figure which we make, being here at Paris whilst all the other ministers are at Court ; and on the other side, I know not what we should do there, or how behave ourselves in a place where the two Courts are inseparable."<sup>1</sup>

On one occasion when the Stuarts were at Versailles Prior had the curiosity to loiter for a view of the young Prince of Wales, the boy who in a few years would be known as James III by his friends, and as the Pretender by his enemies. The poet found him not handsome, but very lively, and took care to show him no respect, though he had the satisfaction of observing that he was himself pointed out to the prince.

But if there was flattery for James, there was real admiration, the fruit of painful experience, for William the Deliverer. "For all the caresses this Court, in imitation of their master, make to King James, it is incredible what true respect and veneration they bear to King William (as they call him) and his merit, and how the soldiers particularly speak of him. '*Le premier homme*

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

*de son métier !* ' *Le plus beau prince du monde !* ' are the least things they say of him ; and when they are free and in company where they dare venture to call things by their own names, they downright talk of their monarch much at the rate we did of King James a little before he left us.

" These are only some and really some of the best, but the generality of the nation are empty, superficial, ill people, just fit to be oppressed and misused as they are."<sup>1</sup> When one reads that last sentence, one can no longer doubt the sincerity of Prior's assertion that his most ardent desire was to be thought a good Englishman.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

## CHAPTER IV

### “ AN EXPERIENCED SUBALTERN MINISTER ”

IN April, 1698, Portland was recalled to England, and Prior ordered to remain at the embassy until further notice. The elaborate visits and receptions with which the mission had been inaugurated had all to be repeated. Indeed, the two series of ceremonies practically overlapped. May was well advanced before the earl could get away.

The work which he left in his secretary's hands was not of a very arduous nature. The question of the day was : who should inherit the Spanish dominions when the miserable life of the imbecile and diseased Charles II should have come to its long expected end ? On this complicated question, which diplomacy could not prevent from at last plunging Europe into a new war, Portland and the French ministers, Torcy and Pomponne, had held many private conversations, the trend of which they divulged to no one but their royal masters. On the understanding thus informally arrived at was based the First Partition Treaty, which was negotiated by William himself and secretly signed in the summer of 1698. Its terms, reduced to their simplest, provided that the Electoral Prince of Bavaria should succeed to Spain ; while of the other two claimants, whose actual prospects or possessions were obviously too great to be substantially increased with comfort to the rest of Europe, the Dauphin was to be given the Two Sicilies and the Emperor the Milanese.

With the departure of Portland, Paris ceased to be the centre of the discussion of these high matters. Prior,

therefore, had little part in their settlement, and can only have had a very general notion of what was forward. He was charged, however, to keep his masters informed of the temper of France, a duty for which his gifts peculiarly fitted him. His keen powers of observation were not likely to pass over, nor his mordant intelligence to minimise, the distrust and nervousness with which Paris looked towards Loo. His letters of this date, and especially those addressed to Portland, must have proved extremely valuable, and not least so for the gloss of criticism which illuminates the record of fact.

At this point Prior's own necessities once more claim our attention. Just as at the Hague, the secretary no sooner found himself in the situation of *chargé d'affaires*, than he also found himself in a position of acute financial embarrassment. His allowance, it is true, was now 40s. a day, or exactly double what it had been three years earlier. He also had his Irish appointment, though that was proving less profitable than he had been led to expect. But life in Paris was far more expensive than at the Dutch town, where the English secretary had been able to dazzle the sober citizens by the figure he cut. Here he was afraid of compromising his country's dignity : he could not afford to play loo at 6d. a dozen. Gravest symptom of all, even his best friend failed to comfort him. "Dear Horace ! I have a sentence of him upon most occasions, but I find nothing in him applicable to staying at Paris upon 40s. a day, when one's coach costs one louis and one's lodging another, before I or mine have eat or drink." To Albemarle, as ever, he explained his position at large.

"Je dois rester icy après my Lord Portland jusques à l'arrivée d'un autre ministre. C'est un grand honneur, je l'avoue, d'estre icy, si ce n'étoit que pour vingt-quatre



heures, de la part de sa Majesté ; mais quand ce successeur seroit nommé demain au matin, il ne pourra venir en moins de trois mois. En attendant, votre ministre par interim fera très mauvais figure, si l'intercession de my Lord Albemarle ne lui procure quelque augmentation à son 40s. par jour. Jusques icy j'ay fait une dépense honnête en égard à la dignité de la commission du Roy, mais il me sera impossible d'en user de même quand je ne pourrai plus recourir à la table de Milord Portland, et il ne sera pas comme il faut de chercher mon dîner à l'auberge, ni d'aller à pied aux ministres : et il ne sera ni pour l'honneur du Roy ni pour ma propre satisfaction de faire voir à tout le monde icy que cette grande ambassade de 80 lacqués s'est dégénérée tout d'un coup dans un secrétariat qui à peine en pouvoit soutenir deux. Je ne plaide pas icy ma propre cause, my Lord, car cecy ne sera pas pour long tems, et je suis assez philosophe de me contenter de fort peu, mais la grandeur du Roy, et les habitudes que j'ay contractés icy demandent que je sois un peu en état de déclarer que je n'étois pas secrétaire de Milord Portland mais de son maître. Voicy l'affaire, my Lord. Vous vous intéresserez si vous le jugez raisonnable. Stepney à Dresden avoit £4 par jour sans le caractère d'envoyé ; il en a cinq à l'heure qu'il est en Prusse. Cresset et d'Hervert en ont autant à Zell et en Suisse. Je ne dis plus mot. Je suis tout à sa Majesté, et croyray toujours cela plus éligible qu'elle ordonne plus facilement. My Lord Portland est convaincu de l'impossibilité de faire la chose bien sur le pied où elle est : il me promet même d'en écrire au Roy, d'en parler, de le faire, et tout ce qu'on voudra, mais on oublie quelque fois les choses où on n'est pas visiblement intéressé. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 211.

This last reference to Portland is rather ungenerous, but Prior did not forget that he was writing to Portland's rival. He ends his letter, part of which has been given elsewhere, with a compliment in his neatest manner. "C'est aujourd'hui le jour de Saint George, nous avons tous nos croix rouges aux chapeaux ; et quand je boiray le soir à la santé du souverain de cet ordre, vous permettrez que j'y ajoste la vostre, et d'espérer de vous voir bientôt revêtu de cet habit à la Chapelle de Windsor."

The result of all this importunity was that Prior's allowance was doubled. The increased rate was to be paid as from his arrival in France, but, as at the Hague, there was a difficulty over the method of paying it. The Treasury, fearing to create a precedent, would not credit the secretary with £4 a day on their books. They decided instead to send him lump sums at irregular intervals. In the autumn he received £500 as of the King's bounty ; in the following February part of the secret service money was assigned to him. He regarded these tortuous methods with his customary fatalism. Whatever happened, he would leave France a beggar, he said.

No doubt Prior's total lack of private fortune was a real disadvantage to him in a position which brought him into daily contact with men of wealth and influence. Nevertheless, one cannot help referring his continual solicitude for his pocket to an innate materialism ; and although, as already suggested, an honourable ambition was an element in his desire for advancement, he cannot by any stretch of indulgence be called disinterested. Nor was he any more prone to unprofitable generosity in his public capacity than in his private. The *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, was his creed in international politics. "The *lex talionis* is the best law I know upon earth, and I am sure it is the

most convenient for us whilst we have to do with these people," the French. The release of prisoners, who lay in great quantities on both sides of the channel as victims of the late war, was a matter with which he had much to do; and he is tireless in urging that the tally of the liberated must be exact. It is the same with regard to captures made by privateers after the cessation of hostilities. Let England beware lest France snatch any advantage in the rectification of such indiscretions. Not that these were appropriate occasions for charity; but Prior's suspicious insistence on the uttermost farthing is a little strident.

On the vexed question of Mary of Modena's jointure of £50,000 a year,<sup>1</sup> his opinion changed. At first he was in favour of withholding it unless the Stuarts should leave St. Germain. Later, however, he came to the conclusion that it ought to be paid. He considered that his government was committed to it, and that it would purchase William III a reputation for generosity. If it were not to be paid, he begged "to be furnished with chicaning answers" for use when pressed on the point.

As a matter of fact, Prior was quite capable of inventing his own "chicaning answers." For instance, political opinion in England was at this time sharply divided on the question of the army, which William, to the anger of the Tories, wished to keep standing in numbers sufficient to meet emergencies. The point was one which naturally excited the keenest interest in France, and Marshal Villeroi questioned Prior closely thereon. "I gave our desiring to keep up some troops this turn," Prior told Portland, "that it was rather that we would

<sup>1</sup> For this point see Macaulay. The question was whether it had been promised unconditionally in the Treaty of Ryswick. It was not paid until near the end of Anne's reign.

be grateful to the officers and soldiers that had served so well than that we should have any real necessity for them, that as far as I could judge from England, as everybody was entirely satisfied with the peace, so my Lord Portland and the English that have been here since the making it might see by everything that his Most Christian Majesty designed absolutely the maintaining it. This pleased him; '*vous parlez avec raison, monsieur, me dit il.*' But I thought just the contrary."<sup>1</sup>

Matt was at great pains to get into Villeroi's good graces. He had many conversations with the marshal, to whom he referred as his "tutor" or "governor." Really, he had a very hearty contempt for him, would send Portland the lampoons which he inspired, and announced his intention of adding to their number. He considered him a better courtier than politician; than soldier either, he might have added; for Villeroi had proved himself a very unworthy successor of Condé and Turenne, and had shared the pillory with Boufflers in Prior's own *Ballad on the Taking of Namur*. It is improbable that the foppish marshal was acquainted with that *jeu d'esprit*: he would scarcely have relished its humour or have been so tolerant as Boileau.

Another matter on which he sought information was the strength and quality of the English militia. "I augmented their number to 200,000, and told him they were stout fellows well fed, and that had for 400 years past had such a notion of liberty that they would die for their cause, good or bad, provided they thought it good. I said that in the Revolution, these men being generally for the King (then Prince of Orange), we might have expected a battle or two with King James's forces in case they had not forsook him; but by the lieutenants'

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 230.

putting the militia in good order, we should have had no reason to have doubted of the liberty of the nations ; and let him know what Cromwell's troops, who were only these a little taught, had done at home, what Morgan's had done before Dunkirk, and what the English new-raised troops, who were actually the same men as the militia, had done in this war in Flanders." <sup>1</sup> On which brilliant flight Portland passed the dry comment : " Vous avez fort bien répondu, monsieur, à votre gouverneur, mais si vous faites des gasconnades trop grandes, et que qu'ils entendent d'ailleurs le contraire, l'on ne vous croira plus." <sup>2</sup> Portland was no poet. Dorset or Montagu would, or should, have been a more sympathetic recipient of these recitals.

In fooling Villeroi, keeping a look-out for breaches of the treaty and an eye on the movements of the Jacobites, trying to get at the truth about the Assassination Plot and reporting the results of all these activities to England, the secretary had a good deal to do. Grumble as he might, there is no doubt that he relished these intervals of responsibility. It was, however, with great pleasure that he learned that the Earl of Jersey was on his way to Paris as Portland's successor. John Macky in his *Memoirs* writes of Jersey as one who had " gone through all the great offices of the kingdom with a very ordinary understanding ; was employed by one of the greatest kings that ever was, in affairs of the greatest consequence. He makes a very good figure in his person, being tall, well-shaped, handsome and dresses clean." This is not the description, one would have thought, of a man likely to inspire enthusiastic devotion. Yet it is certain that Prior went as far towards enthusiasm in his regard for

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

Jersey as it was in him or his age to go. Neither the Montagus of his early nor the Harleys of his later years could claim to have won such affection from their *protégé*. To quote Macky again, Prior was the earl's "entire creature" as well as his adviser; and their correspondence displays an unconstrained intimacy which is unique as between the poet and a social superior.

In a short paper, entitled "Things relative to myself about and after the treaty of Ryswick," written in a note-book and never before printed, Matt displays the same sense of special obligation to Jersey and Albemarle which pervades his letters to those noblemen. That this document was apparently written for his own eyes alone, corroborates one's impression that, however guilty of flattery he may have been in other quarters, his gratitude in these two cases was genuine. The light that the paper throws on Prior's relations with William III is also interesting; and Johnson would have enjoyed the confirmation of his surmise that the monarch was deaf to the poet's metrical tributes. Lastly, one may note the characteristic philosophy with which he accepted the courtier's lot.

"After the treaty of [Rys]wick it was very evid[ent] that my Lord Villiers [w]as highly in the K's. favour, my having been for some years Secretary from the K. of England to the States Gen: and Secretary to the Embassy at the treaty had given Me frequent oppertunities of speaking to his Maj<sup>ty</sup>. I had written 3 or 4 copyes of verses in his praise, w<sup>ch</sup> sort of trade tho' he seemed either not to understand or to neglect I found he was far f<sup>r</sup> being displeased with: and when ever I addrest to him in any business, I did it in the shortest Phrase I could frame, that he might see I studied his Ease: thus I was as well with him as a person in my

Station could be Imagined, but the friendsp of my Lord Villiers and Mr. Keppel soon after E. of Albemarle made Me much better.

"A private Man who depends upon his own merit in a court will hardly sustain himself there long, and it must be the support of friends that must bear up and confirm his feet, for soon I learned that private merit would not long keep a Man in Court without the assistance and countenance of Men in favour."<sup>1</sup>

Jersey had actually been appointed to the embassy before Portland left Paris; but in June he was down with a fever, and one thing and another delayed his arrival until the end of August. Meanwhile Prior had to find and furnish a house for him. The one on which he fixed, *faute de mieux*, was admirable in itself, but situated in the worst quarter of the town, the Marais, and he felt that he must justify his choice by making it charming, "*pour divertir la petite colère de Madame.*" So he became "*vitrier, blanchisseur, menuisier, tout.*" For himself he took "*une maisonette forte propre*" hard by. Later on, a more suitable residence was found for the ambassador in the Faubourg St. Germain, but Jersey was recalled before the arrangements for his removal thither were complete.

At his first arrival, made in a post-chaise with a secretary and two domestics, Jersey stayed *incognito* with Prior. A few days later he was followed by the countess, went into his own house, and was officially in Paris. His reception, however, was very different from Portland's. There was little fêting or flattery, and less trouble than ever taken to insure against awkward meetings between the Stuarts and William's representative. When he went the round of the King's houses, only deputy officers

<sup>1</sup> MS. in possession of the Duke of Portland.

waited on him, the waterworks did not play, and there was "not a drop of wine or coffee offered to us in the whole two days."

Jersey repaid coolness with coolness, avoided the Court when King James was likely to be there, and, when summoned to attend William at Loo in November, only took his formal leave of Louis at the eleventh hour. This journey to Loo, indeed, aroused no little suspicion in Paris. "The least people will have," Prior told the Marquess of Winchester, "is either that we are beginning the war again, or that the business of Spain is adjusted between us and France, and that my Lord has this King's sentiments to declare at his arrival at Loo to the King of England; both these opinions are in extremes; according to my little judgment, it is not to be expected that we should be asleep in a time when we see France not disband any troops, and draw good part of those they have towards the confines of Spain; and there is nothing mighty extraordinary for a man of my Lord Jersey's quality and character to be sent for by his master to be particularly instructed how he should behave himself in his embassy; especially since these people make our conduct here extremely hard to manage, and such instructions very necessary by their behaviour in everything to those of St. Germaines."<sup>1</sup>

Jersey returned to Paris about Christmas time, and the next two months were uneventful. Prior's comment on the visit to Loo is undoubtedly a true reflection of the state of affairs. There was some suspicion on both sides, but no real danger of a rupture of the peace. The First Partition Treaty, though still a secret to the world at large, had been signed and seemed likely to prelude a peaceful settlement of the Spanish question.

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 289.



There was nothing to do but wait for the death of the unhappy king.

But Charles was not the first pawn to be swept from the European chess-board. In December, 1698, Prior had been complaining that there was not enough news to furnish a letter to Lord Dorset once in six months ; and by way of diversion he had sought, though without success, to be sent to Nancy on a mission of congratulation to the young Duke and Duchess of Lorraine. Early in February, 1699, he had news of the highest importance for his masters : the young Electoral Prince of Bavaria, chosen heir to the Spanish throne, was dead " of a fever and convulsions," and the First Partition Treaty, fruit of so much whispering, was not worth the paper on which it was written.

Before its place had been taken by another, Prior's diplomatic career had come temporarily to an end. The events which led up to the most radical change which his career had known since he left England as Dursley's secretary will be described in due course, but something must first be said of the unofficial activities which occupied his leisure hours in Paris. At first he was no doubt well enough occupied in seeing (and criticising) the monuments of France's fame, and making the acquaintance of the survivors of the Grand Siècle. As time went on, however, his pursuits more and more bore reference to his native land. One has the feeling that he took a sentimental pleasure in doing little commissions for his friends in London ; in obtaining medals and prints for them ; in trying to make Rigaud finish Portland's portrait, of which he had bespoken a copy to add to his collection of portraits of the ministers he had served ; even in sending Jersey a model of "a little size dish for porridge." Of poetry we do not hear much at this time ; though that

it was not altogether out of his thoughts is shown by the postscript to the following letter, written, with something of the Walpolean humour and a touch of the Shandean, to three young men who were all destined to a measure of distinction.<sup>1</sup>

“ I am glad, my good friends Boyle and Coddington, that you stand so near each other that a man may take aim at you at once. I wish Compton had subscribed too, that one letter might have served you all three ; for though I bustle about and pass for a man of business, I am as idle as the best of you. I must write to my correspondents, but for my friends I only trouble them when I have occasion for their help ; these are my principles ; you may act with me accordingly. I thank you, my dear Mr. Boyle (if you are so, but they say your brother is dead and you are an earl), for your hospitality to my ladies ; some, you know, have received angels in the shape of strangers, but mine, I think, are flesh and blood, at least they pass for such at Paris ; they are of that number that my Lord Hastings calls succulent ladies. What they came to do in England, God knows, if to plot, or upon some more innocent design. My Lord Portland, however, is obliged to you for your care and kindness, in observing and visiting them, and so is his secretary.

“ Colonel Coddington, your father is dead, and if you have not philosophy to sustain the loss, burn your Malebranche and wet your pocket handkerchief ; but if you are a true heir, come again to the Marais, where I have a little house and will receive you as I love you. Your Toriano is a little under the dominion of the moon ;

<sup>1</sup> Charles Boyle, Bentley's opponent in the *Phalaris* controversy ; Christopher Codrington, a distinguished soldier, Governor of the Leeward Islands, 1697-1703 ; Spencer Compton, Speaker of the House of Commons, 1715-27.

he will go to Montpellier because four doctors send him ; he says he intends to be cured of a consumption here, because he recovered of it last summer in England ; the man, indeed, is whimsical, it is pity ; he is gone forward, God speed him. I laughed at him as little as I could, which was all, I think, you could in reason expect from me.

"And thou, though last, not least in my affections, Spencer Compton, where dost thou live, or what dost thou do ? Pray bid Robin resolve me this question. Hopkins is here and going to Italy. We remember you when we think of our friends in England. Adieu.

*Postscript.*—"My services to the Fish against he prints a new miscellany. I will, as I have promised him, look up some bad verses to hinder the sale of the book. Do they translate Lucan ? or how do the Muses go forward ?" <sup>1</sup>

"The Fish" must be Dryden, to whose *Miscellanies* Prior contributed several poems. Another poet to whom he refers in his letters of this period is John Dennis. "I am going to give my three shillings," he told Dr. William Aglionby, "to a poor poet who has made us a fine entertainment of *Rinaldo and Armida*: 'tis Mr. Dennis, who from being a critic has been pleased to come under the lash of criticism. The Grand Jury presented him some days ago, and 'tis fit we should do so too to enable him to answer them." Dennis was an unsuccessful author and a disagreeable man, in one of whose frequent quarrels, Prior, playing once more a beneficent part, became involved a few months before his death. The author of *Rinaldo and Armida* is mainly remembered as a victim of the *Dunciad*.

While in London at the beginning of 1698, Prior had been proposed as a Fellow of the Royal Society. He

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 275.

had, however, been hurried away in Portland's train before all the necessary steps had been taken, and in November he was still doubtful whether he belonged to that learned body. This is curious, as his election had actually taken place on 23rd March. His interest in scholarship is shown by the trouble he took to obtain permission for Cambridge University to make use of the Greek type employed in the Louvre editions of the classics.

In spite of or, more accurately perhaps, because of these dealings with England, Prior suffered from an increasing nostalgia. As soon as the novelty of Paris had worn off, he wished himself in London. The appointment of Jersey to the embassy did much to reconcile him to his exile, but from the first it was understood that Jersey's stay in Paris would not be a long one, and after his visit to Loo he was constantly spoken of as the next Secretary of State.

These rumours made Matt very restless. "I have played the minister here in my Lord Jersey's absence [at Loo]," he told Dorset, "and, now he is returned, we are preparing for his entry, so I am to appear with him as I did with my Lord Portland, in a new gaudy coat and with an expensive equipage. I must own to your Lordship I am weary of this dancing on the high rope in spangled breeches, and if my Lord Jersey be Secretary of State (as it is thought he may be in some time), I will endeavour to get home and seat myself in a desk in his office, for I had rather be Matt Prior near my dear Lord Dorset (your Lordship must pardon me the familiarity of the expression) than *Monsieur l'Envoyé* in any Court in Christendom; and I know not how it is, life runs away before one is aware of it, and I shall hardly have time enough in that part of it which is to come, to testify the obligations I have to your Lordship for so many years

past.”<sup>1</sup> When the news came at the end of March, 1699, that Jersey had actually been recalled, and that the Earl of Manchester was to succeed him in Paris, Prior wrote to Charles Montagu in a similar strain, even repeating his simile of the tight-rope ; but, since Montagu was First Lord of the Treasury, he tagged a financial supplement on to his complaints.

“By the last post we hear that my Lord Jersey is recalled, my Lord Manchester named to succeed him, and I ordered to stay here till the newest of these Excellencies arrives here. I know not what my Lord Jersey is designing for in England ; but if it be to be Secretary of State, I presume I may be his Ellis,<sup>2</sup> which is descending from the high rope to tumble more safely upon the ground, and it is time for me so to do after what I have seen in foreign employments, and as far as I can see by my being ordered to stay only my Lord Manchester’s coming, something of this kind is designed for me. I have written to my Lord Manchester, and upon his answer shall be ready to serve him with all the zeal and ardour which I owe to the blood of the Montagus. For God’s sake will you think of a little money for me, for I have fluttered away the Devil and all in this monkey country, where the air is infected with vanity, and extravagance is as epidemical as the itch in Scotland. My bounty money from the King is now due, five hundred pounds ; if one could get a warrant signed for it till you thought a little of my arrears ; for to be pawned in France and lose my hopes in England at one time is too much for any man to bear who was not born under the star of Colonel Powers. I beg you to help me in these whimsical circumstances under which I lie at present, though God knows

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

<sup>2</sup> John Ellis was under-secretary to Sir William Trumbull.

all the return I can make you is promising to continue forever with the greatest truth and respect, etc.”<sup>1</sup>

Politeness due to his friend's kinsman—for Manchester was also a Montagu—could not suppress the poet's keenness to be home. The powers, however, had already decided that he must stay at all events until the new ambassador's arrival. There was sure to be the usual gap; ambassadors seem never to have hurried to their duties; and it would be necessary for Prior to fill it, for he alone had a thorough knowledge of how matters stood at the embassy. “While we have not an ambassador there,” as Vernon put it, “we should at least have an experienced subaltern minister, and not send a perfect stranger with a diminutive character.” There were delicate negotiations afoot, discreet gropings towards a new partition treaty; business too confidential for paper, so that of Prior's part in it nothing more definite can be known than that it was important and responsible. The ripeness of his experience in diplomacy comes out in the advice which, together with his congratulations, he offered Lord Manchester.

“ . . . . I know not when your Lordship designs to be at Paris, but I take it for granted it will not be long first, if you determine your coaches and equipage to be made here, since they may be making and your house furnishing, you being here; since you are not obliged to see anybody except privately, and you please yourself till you have had your public audience, and your Lordship knows, your appointments commence from your taking leave of his Majesty; but this is a consideration your Lordship will best judge of, and I will only say upon this head that the beauty of one's coaches and the *bel air* of one's liveries are things essential to a man's reputation

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 326.

in France. I presume Mr. Stanyan will come out again with your Lordship ; if so, it would not be amiss that he were here before your Lordship, that I might remit to him the state of our affairs, and your Lordship might find things in a method ; and if a house-steward or some such servant were here, your Lordship would find the advantage of it at your arrival, provided you do not decide to be here soon yourself. You can hardly imagine how different [*should be* difficult] it is to get a house fit for your quality and character in the Fauxbourg St. Germain. My Lord Jersey was for want of a house in that quarter obliged to take up with one at the other end of the town, which is a most intolerable inconvenience. He had just remedied it by taking a new house in the Fauxbourg at Easter next, and in my opinion your Lordship cannot do better than to take his bail and continue it ; the house is perfectly fit for you, and in the best part and wholesomest air of the town, not far from where my Lord Port[land] lived, and by consequence near the Tuilleries, the Cours, the Comedy, convenient for Versailles, and for the foreign ministers and the English to come to you."

The writer then proceeds to details of rent, and of the furniture and horses which Jersey would be prepared to make over to his successor ; and ends with renewed offers of service : " I hope you will command me as you would do one of your own domestics." <sup>1</sup>

He was none the less determined that his departure from Paris should be as nearly as possible coincident with Manchester's arrival. There was little idea of his being reappointed to the secretaryship, though Montagu rather wished it. Manchester had his eye on a man of his own, the Stanyan referred to in the letter just quoted ;

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

and as for Prior himself, he said flatly that only the King's command would keep him in Paris ; " and in that case, if it were to live in the Highlands of Scotland (which with respect to my Lord Selkirk's better judgment is not the happiest place upon earth), I shall be very far from disputing it, or murmuring."

Jersey left Paris about the end of April, having promised to do what he could for his devoted subordinate. Directly after his arrival he received the Secretary's seals and on 15th May addressed his first letter from Whitehall to Matthew. The seat in the office was thus assured ; for the King was agreeable, and suggested no bleak mission among the clans. Nevertheless, more than one of Prior's friends advised him against the step which he was determined to take. Montagu considered it a step downwards. Richard Powys discoursed of small profits and uncertainty of tenure. Ellis had never made £500 a year from the office, and the time was hazardous for ministers and their underlings. Jersey himself, though he wanted him, thought that Matt had earned " something better than a desk to write at in the office " ; while admitting that there was little advantage in staying abroad, and that if he wanted to settle in England, his best course was first to get there.

At all this advice Prior lost patience. Replying to Jersey, he stated his unalterable position in terms which cannot but have flattered his correspondent.

" I grow very peevish with my friends' sentiments, envoyships, strange stuff, to go hern-hawking with a Duke of Zell or succeed Stepney when he is weary of soliciting for Dankleman's pardon. I will live with you, my Lord, with a desk or without one. I lived with you at the Hague, I returned with you into England, I was to have gone with you into Ireland, I stayed for



you in France, I long to come to you in England, and I will never go from thence till you send me. My obligations to you are unspeakable, and so is my zeal for your service. What would people have? This is my case, I will print it, and shew it to mankind, and I will be happy in receiving your commands, whether they will or no. So the Horse need not neigh any longer or his man be discreet in a coffee-house (as I hear he is) upon that subject."<sup>1</sup>

The rare fervour of these words contrasts vividly with the smooth and clever adulation of which Prior was an habitual spendthrift. "The Horse," it may be observed, was the designation by which Prior and Jersey always referred to Manchester. His man was Abraham Stanyan.

The next thing was to get "the Horse" quickly to Paris; and in this matter Prior's friends seem to have done all they could to further his wishes. Meanwhile he was himself looking out for some employment to supplement the office of his choice; for though the expenses of an under-secretary were small compared with those of a diplomatist, the drop from £4 a day to less than £500 a year was considerable. But in whatever he asked for, he found himself forestalled. The secretaryship to the Lords Justices, who governed England during the King's absences, was found to be the perquisite of one Mr. Yard. An extraordinary clerkship to the Council, which Prior thought might be vacant, proved equally elusive. These disappointments made him bitter, and in a letter to Jersey he vented his spleen against his more successful brother place-hunters.

"What I wrote to you last post about being clerk of the Council was, I see, pure speculation, and like those

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 356.

houses one sometimes builds without ever removing one stone, for brother Stanyan has it, so I have only to beg your pardon for having troubled you with an impertinence. Stanyan thinks it reasonable that he should be assured of an employment at home before he condescends to relieve me. Yard thinks it madness for me to return till towards Michaelmas, because he may be secretary of the Regents in the meantime ; and Stepney has a thousand pounds a year at home for playing at one-and-thirty-bone-ace with the Electress at Berlin, and wonders what makes me think of going into England at all. This is the world, and makes one laugh. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

He was particularly exasperated against certain people whom he calls the Puggies, who had presumed to pity him. They appear to have been relations, perhaps a sister and brother-in-law, of George Stepney's.

A tributary or perhaps the main cause of Prior's irritation, was his position in regard to that unreal and unsatisfactory office of his, the secretaryship to the Irish Lord Justices. It will be remembered that he had received this appointment on the eve of the negotiations at Ryswick. He still held it when he was moving heaven and earth for a similar office in London. By this time he seems quite to have abandoned the idea of ever going to Dublin. But the idea of resigning his position there was equally remote. It is a typical and amusing example of the pluralism of the day.

The three Lords Justices who were to have had the poet's services were the Earl of Galway, the Marquess of Winchester and the Earl of Jersey, who in April, 1697, when the appointment was made, was still Lord Villiers. The last-named had recommended Prior for the post, and the success of his recommendation appears to have

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

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been in some measure due to the support of Lord Albemarle. His colleagues, however, were both perfectly ready to employ Prior.

At first the appointment was taken quite seriously by all concerned. That the Justices must wait for their secretary until the treaty had been signed, was understood. "It will be a great consolation to your wandering dove, when he comes with the olive-branch in his mouth, to find a place prepared where he may set footing," Prior wrote to Montagu with reference to his new office. Until that happy consummation, his duties were to be performed by the under-secretary, Mr. May; and he was pleased to retain the services of the two clerks who had formed his predecessor's staff.

For a time this arrangement worked very well. Prior maintained an amicable correspondence with his inferiors and superiors alike. Galway reduced certain fees, which were the secretary's perquisites, but courteously explained his reasons. May and the clerks kept their absent chief in touch with the business of the office. Prior, on his side, was full of regrets for his detention, and acquiescence in his masters' policy; though to resist an occasional flippant aside was not in his nature. "I have letters from Ireland," he wrote to Dr. William Aglionby, "that only tell me one of my masters [Winchester] is married and the other [Galway] rules like Titus with great virtue and without a Berenice. Your reflection upon their speech is too severe; men of their quality are not obliged to be wits, and people have not chosen kings for being so since the reign of Fleckno. I wish the third of my masters [Villiers] were in his dominions, and so does he too. Most wise governors are of opinion things go best when they are present: the Czar perhaps may be of another mind."

When the peace had been made, and Prior, instead of setting out for Dublin, made preparations for Paris, Galway was disappointed but resigned to the King's will. He was prepared to keep the secretaryship open until the end of Portland's mission and expressed his sentiments in a letter, which Prior endorsed, "Ld. Gallway, Dec. 7, 1697, by which he consents to my going into France." When Portland's secretary became Jersey's, Lord Galway was equally complaisant.

The first signs of trouble were of a financial nature. Prior had understood that the office was worth £1,000 a year. In this he very soon found himself mistaken, the reason of his disappointment being the reduction of fees to which reference has already been made. These fees, which were the fines paid for military commissions and licences of absence from the army, formed the main bulk of the secretary's profits. A statement sent to Prior in August, 1697, shows to what an extent he was made to suffer for the benefit of his country's defenders.

*A list of the military fees in the chief secretary's office and reduced by the Earl of Galway:—*

	Ancient fees			Reduced to		
	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
For licence of absence to an officer of the army in the kingdom ..		13	6		10	0
To an officer out of the kingdom ..	1	6	0		15	0
To a non-commissioned officer in the kingdom .. .. .		7	6		2	6
To a non-commissioned officer out of the kingdom .. .. .		13	6		5	0
For a licence to sue any officer of the army or attending the state ..		13	6		5	0

*Fees of commissions signed in England and taken by the chief secretary in Ireland:—*

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				Ancient fees			Reduced to		
				£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Horse and dragoons—									
Colonel	..	..	..	6	5	0	2	12	0
Lieutenant-colonel	..	..	..	5	15	0	2	0	0
Major	..	..	..	4	15	0	2	0	0
Captain	..	..	..	3	2	6	1	10	0
Cornet	..	..	..	1	12	6		10	0
Staff officers, each	..	..	..	1	12	6		10	0
				Ancient fees			Reduced to		
				£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Foot field officers or horse—									
Captain	..	..	..	2	6	0	1	0	0
Lieutenant	..	..	..	1	15	0		10	0
Ensign	..	..	..	1	2	6		7	6
Staff officers, each	..	..	..	1	2	6		7	6

No very deep calculations are required to ascertain that this revision meant a very serious reduction of the secretary's profits. The sum of £666 13s. 6d., which was due to Prior after rather less than a year, was really better than might have been expected. At the end of seventeen months the total was £1,385 19s.

This would have been a very pleasant addition to the income which Matt was earning more strenuously in Paris. There was, however, Mr. May to be considered. As he was doing the work, it was only fair that he should have a share of the profits. To Prior's amazement he claimed the whole. In the latter part of 1698 a triangular correspondence took place on the subject, the third party being John Tucker, a mutual friend. He it was who had recommended May to Prior, and he doubtless felt a responsibility.

It is unnecessary to analyse this correspondence in any detail. An air more of sorrow than of anger sits equally upon the letters of May and of Prior; while Tucker played his part of peacemaker with no little tact. The result was on the whole satisfactory to Matthew. Two-thirds of the profits were to accrue to him, and May, plaintive but submissive, was to have the remainder.

This quarrel was arranged without reference to higher authorities, but it had a certain bearing on the proceedings whereby Prior finally lost the job altogether. His case against May had been that the latter was merely acting as his deputy. May, on the other hand, claimed that he held the secretaryship absolutely pending Prior's arrival. This was the view which Lord Galway also took when he decided to dispense with the secretary's too theoretical services.

Prior fully realised that he stood in danger of dismissal as early as May, 1699. The tone of Galway's letters had for some time been growing stiffer. It may, therefore, have been literally true, but it was scarcely candid to assert, as he did in a letter to Portland of 3rd July, that Galway had "neither by word or warning said once that this storm was coming." This letter, although long, is worth quoting as a statement of the poet's view of his situation. The candour of his indignation, ill founded as it seems by modern standards, is at any rate beyond question.

"I have dared to speak so much to you in relation to a thing infinitely above me, and for which I now see no remedy [*the political crisis, of which later*], that I will only trouble your Lordship at present upon the subject to tell you that I wish all things should succeed as you would have them, and that you are safe arrived in Holland, where I hope in my way home to assure you of the sense I have of your favour to me. I wait my Lord Manchester's coming, and I believe may do so this month yet ; after which I am ready to put off these plumes with which I flutter about Paris, and to return home to labour under the protection of my good friend and patron, my Lord Jersey, in an employment of less noise and figure, and though my inclination did not oblige me to

this choice, the hard usage which my Lord Gallway threatens me with would force me to it, for though I am yet actually in France, and by the King's order intimated to the Lords Justices upon my coming abroad that my pretences should be safe in Ireland, my Lord Gallway writes me word that they have thought fit to dispose of the secretaryship to Mr. May, who is second secretary and acted as deputy from me in the employment of first secretary as long as his Majesty was pleased to dispense with my service. His Majesty does as yet most certainly dispense with it, for I am where his orders retain me, and where your Lordship's goodness and choice brought me, that is, at Paris ; my Lord Gallway is but one of the three governors, and the three conjointly have not the power of making the secretary, but only of recommending him to his Majesty, who chooses him, and who dispenses with that service as with any other as his pleasure is. Mr. Poultney is clerk of the Council in Ireland, yet has lived constantly since my Lord Rumney's time in England. Mr. Stepney, Mr. Blathwayt (and almost everybody else that has any employ) are excused from the functions of it when his Majesty's service and orders retain them in a foreign country ; yet I alone am destined by my Lord Gallway to be a sacrifice that Mr. May may be first secretary and Mr. Bouhereau (who is my Lord Gallway's countryman and secretary) may be made second secretary of the kingdom.

“ My Lord Gallway has neither by word or warning said once that this storm was coming, but it is easy to know that he did not think good to endeavour to undo what my Lord Portland thought good to do, whilst my Lord Portland was in the Court ; but immediately upon my Lord Portland's retiring, down with Mr. Prior ; so when the pillar is removed the ivy that depended upon

it falls. I know not if his Majesty has yet heard of this thing, in which my Lord Gallway so absolutely determines, but I believe I can intercede with your Lordship (for all what my Lord Gallway thinks to the contrary), that this storm may not fall upon me till I come into England, and may have the liberty to plead my own cause, and that therefore till then the thing may be upon the foot it now is, Mr. May acting as my deputy ; and this can be no prejudice to his Majesty's service, unless it can be imagined that Mr. May has more sense when he acts for himself and without my deputation than when he acts with it ; or else, if my Lord Gallway will actually have any other person for first secretary, Mr. May or that other may be obliged out of the profits of the office to allow me some compensation for the validity of my pretensions till his Majesty shall be pleased to order otherwise, in which case there will remain a fair income for Mr. May, or any other, and his Majesty's business will be as well done as if his poor secretary at Paris were sacrificed to the humour and arbitrary will of my Lord Gallway. I throw myself wholly upon his Majesty's goodness and stand wholly to his decision ; he is too just to let me lose, and I am too happy if he pleases to take my cause in hand. I will only add to your Lordship that I have endeavoured to live in France as becomes the character with which I am honoured, which without Ireland I could not have done, notwithstanding his Majesty's extraordinary goodness to me by your Lordship's intercession. No man can wish better to another's affairs than I do to those of your Lordship, and in what place or circumstances soever you are, no man living is more devoted to your service."<sup>1</sup>

It will be observed that Prior here ascribes Galway's

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 366.



action to Portland's recent retirement. Doubtless another contributory cause was that Jersey was no longer one of the Irish governors. As Secretary of State and a Lord Justice of England, he had no time for duties which, indeed, he had neglected as completely as his secretary ; in which connection, it is a little curious that neither of them seems to have considered that what was just for the master was equally just for the man.

But Galway was quite capable of acting without reference to either Portland or Jersey. He had no personal attachment to Prior ; he stood very well with the King ; and he had the austerity and sense of duty which was characteristic of the Huguenots. Moreover, with one colleague an absentee and the other a nonentity, he had long been paramount in Irish affairs.

On 13th June he wrote briefly to Prior that since the Lords Justices could no longer hope to see him when he left France, they felt obliged to appoint someone else to the post which he should have filled, and could find none better for that purpose than Mr. May. "*Je vous assure, monsieur, que c'est avec beaucoup de regret que je me vois privé du plaisir, et du secours, que je m'étois promis, quand nous vous aurions auprès de nous ; mais j'espère au moins que nous entretendrions correspondance.*" Prior endorsed this, "My Lord Gallway's sentencing letter." He was in no mood to respond to its polite overtures. "I thank God I can hate and love, and the objects of my different passions are the Earls of Gallway and Jersey. I wish I may vex the one as heartily as I shall always endeavour to obey the other." It is unnecessary to state to the object of which passion these words were addressed.

His answer to Galway's ultimatum does not seem to have survived, but the recipient expressed astonishment

at its tone. Prior's argument, however, was not unreasonable. He had been appointed to the secretaryship by the King ; it was at the King's command, and through no fault of his own, that his going to Ireland had been repeatedly deferred ; and only the King could remove him. To this Galway replied that the King had, in effect, removed him, and quoted a letter from Lord Albemarle, written by William's authority as early as 29th April, stating that Prior's acceptance of the English under-secretaryship would cancel his Irish appointment. He further denied that May had been Prior's deputy : he had, Galway maintained, actually fulfilled the office of both first and second secretaries pending Prior's arrival ; moreover, the first secretaryship had long been promised him.

Faced with Albemarle's letter, a less persistent place-hunter than Matt would have been daunted. He, however, was determined to fight the matter through. William was at Loo, but Albemarle himself, who was with him, would be a ready advocate. Jersey wrote to the Dutch favourite on behalf of their common friend. Between Prior and Jersey there was a frequent correspondence, in which Galway figures in no favourable light. Nothing is more significant of the intimacy which existed between these two than their habit of referring by nicknames to men who were the peers and colleagues of the one and the social and official superiors of the other. Just as Manchester figures as the Horse in their letters, the offensive Governor of Ireland appears as Crop ; while Portland, being Jersey's brother-in-law, is Swager.

At first it seemed as though Prior would win his case. Of the other Lords Justices, Winchester, who had lately succeeded his father as Duke of Bolton, was an amiable nonentity who accepted his colleague's decisions as a

matter of course. The Earl of Berkeley, who had taken Jersey's place on the commission, had, as Lord Dursley, been Prior's first master in diplomacy. He was well enough disposed, but found himself unable to be of much assistance. May's appointment had been made before his arrival in Dublin. Prior's hopes, therefore, rested mainly on Albemarle's influence with the King.

William displayed an unusual vacillation in this matter. Doubtless his mind was preoccupied with more important concerns ; for affairs both at home and abroad were looking very black for him. Be that as it may, having in April sanctioned Prior's supersession, in August he ordered his reinstatement. Galway promptly protested and, had it not been for the counter-arguments of Blathwayt and Albemarle, would have at once gained his point. Rather meanly, and against the desire of Lord Berkeley ("who thinks it a cruel thing to endeavour to cut any man's throat with his own pen"), he had sent the King the intemperate letter which Prior had written in the first flush of his anger. A compromise was arranged, however, whereby the whole business was to be put back into its original state until the King should otherwise decree. It is difficult to see in what way this arrangement differed from a complete victory for the secretary. Their Excellencies expressed obedience, but Galway was far from satisfied. He held a trump-card, and he played it. He sent in his resignation.<sup>1</sup>

Now, although the King was quite sincerely Prior's well-wisher, he was not prepared to sacrifice on his account a man who had served him so well as Galway. For the earl—whom Macaulay calls "the hereditary chief of the refugees," the French protestants who had fled to

<sup>1</sup> See an interesting letter to the Duke of Shrewsbury, dated 11th Nov., 1699 [*Buccleuch MSS. at Montagu House*, ii, 628]. This episode has not been noticed by Galway's biographers.

England on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes—had fought bravely for the Orange cause on many a field, and for several years past had governed Ireland with no little success. So, after all, Prior lost the office for which he had fought so hard, and Galway retained his until a few months later he fell before the onslaught of Toryism. At that time there was a rumour that Jersey was to be sent into Ireland, and a natural hypothesis that Matt would accompany him. But neither rumour nor hypothesis became anything more substantial; and Prior never saw the city which is so intimately connected with the eminent friend of his later years, the greatest man with whom he ever came into close contact, Jonathan Swift.

## CHAPTER V

### POLITICS

DURING the earlier stages of the Irish controversy Prior was performing those inter-ambassadorial duties with which he was all too familiar, and the *Postboy* was marrying him to Lady Falkland. No amount of urgency could get Manchester to Paris before August. Even then it was decreed that the secretary should see him fairly settled; a task which he performed to the admiration of the ambassador, whose good opinion of him was strengthened by the praises of Monsieur de Torcy. Not until the beginning of September was he free to leave France.

He did not come straight to England, but went first to Loo, where he had "a long and particular audience" with the King, and thence to the Hague, where he had to wait until he had received instructions from William. By the middle of October he was in London; and on the 21st of that month Manchester wrote from Paris: "I shall now begin to trouble you often, believing you are settled in the office, which will be another sort of life than that in France." He proceeds to commendations of Jersey, and expressions of regret for his own loss, which he hopes will be compensated by frequent letters. "I cannot finish this without my wishes that you may succeed in all things for your advantage,"<sup>1</sup> he ends kindly. "The Horse" had his good points, and so long as he was ambassador and Prior under-secretary of State, a friendly and copious flow of correspondence passed between them.

This first letter, however, had hardly been posted

<sup>1</sup> Cole, *Memoirs of Affairs of State*, p. 64.

when the two men met in the flesh. While it was a-writing, Prior was already on his way to Paris. The object of his return was to talk over the Second Partition Treaty, which was now on foot, with Manchester; to attend the earl at his first audience with Louis XIV; and to carry back an authoritative account of what passed on that occasion. It shows in what consideration he was held, not only that he should have been entrusted with so confidential a mission, but that his presence actually raised Manchester's prestige in Paris, and at St. Germain's gave rise to a rumour that the ambassador had been superseded by Matt.

Immediately after the audience he left Paris, and on 3rd November he wrote to Manchester from London:

"I arrived here on Friday night, and everybody confesses that only Roger is fitter than I to be sent express; on Saturday morning my Lord Jersey carried me to the King. I first read to his Majesty what your Lordship said to the King of France, and what the King answered thereupon; and then I explained to his Majesty the substance of the whole that had passed during my being in France. His Majesty is satisfied with every step your Excellency made; and, in one word, we did as we ought to do. His Majesty asked me a great many questions about your entry. You will easily believe I was glad upon that occasion to do you justice. His Majesty asked me about the rank which Mons. de Torcy's coach had; and in all this affair, I can assure your Excellence, he is very well satisfied. . . . I contracted a cold in the voyage, and wisely increased it by running about these two last days. I am blooded, and kept my chamber to-day, which is the reason of my using another hand; I hope your Excellence will excuse it. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

Prior was almost invariably ill after a journey, and on this occasion he contrived to lay in a store of ill-health to last him the winter. When he had been in town a month he still had to employ an amanuensis, and at the beginning of January he reports himself as being on the strictest diet. The letter to Abraham Stanyan which contains this information, however, shows that he was in the thick of that life of literary London for which he had been pining. It is dated from Whitehall, 8th January, 1700.

"On Saturday morning we had three posts from France, the 2nd, 6th and 9th, and yesterday we had a fourth of the 13th. [*These dates are "new style."*] I am looking over all these from you, and I think I have little more to do than to acknowledge them.

"I hope you have all the pictures by this time in your own hands; here are my verses, which, let me tell you, everybody here says are admirable. Davenant's book is highly saucy, but I think it has done no real mischief to our friend in particular, though in general it was and is a hint to show everybody where they should be angry.

"I hear nothing of young Davenant's marriage, but I know him so well that I expect the worst things of that kind from his conduct.

"As good verses might have been made by a true Maroquin as those you sent me, I thank you for them, however, since, if you had had better I presume you would have been equally liberal of them; I had them, too, from Abbé du Bois, from whence I infer that he thought them good. Pray send me *Jonathan* as soon as he is printed, and indeed all dramatic poetry. Pray ask me for no more poetry either sublime or burlesque, for henceforth I will write no more verses.

“ Exceptions to the foregoing rule :—

“ To-morrow night Batterton [*sic*] acts Falstaff, and to encourage that poor house the Kit Katters have taken one side-box, and the Knights of the Toast have taken the other. We have made up a prologue for Sir John in favour of eating and drinking, and to rally your Toasts, and I have on this occasion four lines upon Jacob. We will send you the whole prologue when we have it together.

“ N.B.—My Lord Dorset is at the head of us, and Lord Carbury is general of the enemy’s forces, and that we dine at my Lord Dorset’s, and go from thence in a body. How my health will answer to this, if you should ask, since I came from the Gravelpits but on Saturday, I answer that I only sit down to table when the dessert comes, eat nothing but roasted apples, and drink sack and water.

“ I will think of the books, and of everything else in which I may serve my Lord Manchester, as soon as my health lets me tumble a little more freely amongst my papers than I can do at present.

“ The Savoy ambassador makes his entry to-day, as Mr. Yard will tell you more at large in the *Gazette* next Thursday ; this is a return or, as we call it, an equivalent for what you say of the Portuguese ambassador having a mind to make his exit.”<sup>1</sup>

This letter requires annotation. The pictures referred to are certain pieces which were being painted for Prior in Paris : on behalf of the Duke of Somerset and Jacob Tonson, the great publisher, as it appears from letters of Stanyan’s ; though Prior himself was a collector on a small scale. “ Davenant’s book ” was the *Discourse upon Grants and Resumptions*, by Dr. Charles Davenant, a tract on the burning topic which was so great a factor in the downfall of the Whig Junto. “ Henceforth I will

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 393.



write no more verses " calls for no comment. The poet's farewell to poesy is usually about as final as the actor's farewell to the stage. No trace seems to have survived of the prologue, or of Prior's four lines upon Jacob Tonson, the founder of the Kit-cat club.

The verses which he mentions having sent to Stanyan were the *Carmen Seculare for the Year 1700*, which had just been published by Tonson. This poem, the last that Prior dedicated to William III, is a long and elaborate production of a kind which makes very difficult reading to-day. When fresh from the press, however, it was much admired, and a Latin version, which Prior himself thought " the best thing in that kind that has been written since Buchanan," was made by his old school-fellow Doctor Thomas Dibben, of Trinity College, Cambridge, referred to casually twenty years later in one of the poet's letters to Lord Harley as " dirty Dibben of Dorsetshire."

By this time Prior had settled down to the routine of the office ; and it must have tickled his sense of humour to find himself penning official remonstrances to Abraham Stanyan on the extravagance of the latter's extraordinary expenses. The letters which passed between Manchester and Stanyan on the one side and Jersey and Prior on the other are of considerable importance, but concern the history of Europe rather than any one man's biography. They are of immediate interest, however, as evidence of the intimacy with which the poet moved among the most secret affairs of state.

In June, 1700, Jersey gave up the seals of his secretaryship and accepted the Lord Chamberlain's gold key. Prior also left the office. " I suppose you have long foreseen this," Manchester wrote, " and cannot but have taken care of yourself, being upon the place ; for you

often said, men were forgot abroad." The provision made for the poet was a seat at the Board of Trade and Plantations, where he succeeded a man of even greater renown than himself, John Locke. He held this appointment until he lost it for political reasons at the end of 1706 or the beginning of 1707.

In September there was some talk of his going into Holland, where Lord Jersey was with the King; but, as the King's assent was something less than lukewarm, the project was abandoned. Prior himself did not press it. He had other preoccupations. For some time past he had taken an increasing interest in domestic affairs, and he decided to seek a seat in Parliament.

His first idea was to represent Cambridge University. It may excusably have been forgotten that this busy diplomatist, under-secretary of State, and commissioner of trade was also a fellow of his college. Through all the vicissitudes of his fortune, and in spite of criticism, he had clung to his fellowship, as he was to cling to it through even greater vicissitudes and to the end of his days. Sometimes, when his affairs were harassing, he had thoughts of retiring into the quiet life thus open to him; but it was little more than a whim of dejection and never held him for long. Nevertheless, there was a considerable element of the scholar in his composition and he was constantly in touch with Cambridge life.

A little before he left Paris he had exerted himself to establish a sort of typographical *entente cordiale*. The University was to be allowed to use the Greek type from which the Louvre editions of the classics had been printed, which could only be disposed of with the King's consent. This favour was to be acknowledged in the first volume printed from the type at Cambridge; the price of the type was to be paid in books from England;

the recipe for the ink used in certain *Essays upon Horace and Virgil* recently issued from the University Press was to be disclosed; and a "kind of communication" "*propter bonum ac commodum reipublicae literariae*" was to be established between the University and the French royal library. These desirable arrangements were not complete when Prior came to England, but he left them in the hands of Lord Manchester, and did all he could to advance them on this side of the Channel. On 1st April, 1700, nearly a year after his first extant letter on the subject, he wrote to announce that the Duke of Somerset, as Chancellor of the University, was sending a Cambridge Horace for the *bibliothèque*, and to beg Manchester's furtherance of the purchase of the Greek type, which still hung fire. It had been demanded that the title-page of every book printed therefrom should bear the magniloquent legend, *Cantabrigiae Typis Academicis, Characteribus Graecis Regis Christianissimi*. This was too much in the Louis Quatorze manner to be stomached by an English university, and the less assertive phrase *Typographeio Regio Parisiensi* was eventually substituted.

It was doubtless as a recognition of these services that the degree of M.A. was conferred on Prior in the same year. There is no reason to suppose that he had deliberately performed them with a view to anything more substantial. Nevertheless he may very well have hoped that they would be remembered in his favour when he came seeking election as Parliament man.

Immediately after his return to England, or as soon as his health would let him, he got into touch with his Cambridge friends. On the same day that saw the Kit-catters cheering Betterton's Falstaff, he wrote to Doctor Humphrey Gower, who was still Master of St. John's College and had, one gathers, preserved the absentee's

fellowship against some who would have taken it from him. The letter evidently enclosed a copy of the *Carmen Seculare*.

“ I will not so much as endeavour to make any excuse for my long absence from the college ; it is easier to confess the fault and throw myself wholly upon your goodness. I have long intended to come in person to Cambridge to ask your pardon there, but since my return to England a very ill state of health and a very great deal of business have withheld me. I hope, however, in some time to beg a week or ten days to wait on you and to assure you that, as I have great obligations to the college, and most particularly to the master of it, so I shall always endeavour to show myself not wholly unworthy of them by bearing an entire affection to the society, and a very true respect to him who governs it. Your pupil, my Lord Jersey, has been pleased to accept of me in his office, from which place I ought rather to send you good prose than indifferent verse. I will promise you that this is the only folly of this kind that you shall ever have from me, and that I am a little ashamed of playing the child at thirty-three, though my friends at Court buoy me up (too partially, I am afraid) in the frolic ; whatever I write, sir, you have a right to it, and in what condition soever I am you must command me.”<sup>1</sup>

The member whom Prior hoped to depose was Hammond, a high Tory, who was shortly to forfeit both his reputation and his seat by supping with the French ambassador immediately after Louis XIV had torn up the peace of Europe by his recognition of the Pretender. It was not Prior, however, who succeeded the indiscreet banqueter. The poet, indeed, never came to the poll.

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 394. It may be noted that Prior was thirty-five, not thirty-three.

In the spring he was at Cambridge, where he found many friends ready to support him, though Hammond's position was even then believed to be a strong one. By October there were misunderstandings. Reports were being circulated that he intended to withdraw. He was annoyed, and wrote James Talbot, fellow of Trinity College and his principal Cambridge correspondent, a letter which is not only a protest but reads like an election address in embryo.

" . . . . I hear it said as from some of my acquaintance as if I were resolved not to serve the University in a future parliament. I neither said or wrote anything of this kind to anybody but yourself, and to everybody that had spoke to me of it here I have thought fit to give no other answer but such a one as might shew the great respect I had for the University and the true desire I had to serve that body upon all occasions, and yet might leave me a liberty of retiring and not exposing my friends and myself in case I thought I might meet a repulse in this undertaking. To put the thing in its right light and give you my real sentiments of it, it will be necessary to recapitulate that, whilst I was in France, some of my friends from the University wrote me word that I was looked upon by them and others as a person fit to represent them in Parliament. In saying this, I presume they had an eye to [my] having been from the age of sixteen and to my continuing till that of thirty-four a member of that community, not a pensioner or fellow-commoner, but scholar of the house and fellow of a college, my name constantly in the books and my correspondence with my friends kept up, as well as to my having acted abroad in several stations so as to capacitate me in all probability to represent so illustrious a body. To this I add that I

understood they would have some person whose principle it was to represent, as occasion might require, their steadiness to support the true rights of the English monarchy and the real preservation of theirs and the nation's liberty. On these considerations I was induced to think that they did me a great deal of honour when some of the heads had me in their thoughts, and as they please to continue that favourable opinion of me, I shall always most readily obey any summons they may have for me, be it to promote anything here for the interest of any peculiar person or society, or in general to assert their right in the great council of the nation, as they may judge me worthy. This is the sentiments I was in when I was last at Cambridge, and in which I think I shall always persevere. I would no more plead my merit to be a Parliament man than Coriolanus would shew his wounds to be Consul, and my proceeding in and desisting from my first intention will be wholly governed by the encouragement or coldness which I may receive from the University. In one word I desire with all my soul to serve them whenever it is proposed to me, so as that the thing may seem practicable. But I should be very sorry if from that desire I should only make a foolish figure, and come back again to show my friends at Court that I had not enow of that kind in the University to sustain my interest. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

From this lengthy apology it appears that, however anxious Prior might be to serve his University, fear of defeat at the poll was a deterrent which he did not blush to acknowledge. On this point Talbot sent him a vast epistle which shows that, in the opinion of one on the spot, the candidate had by no means over-estimated his hazards. The difficulty was that Prior was *not* on

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 423.

the spot. Hammond, on the other hand, frequently resided at Cambridge and was a sedulous cultivator of his popularity, which was very considerable, especially among the younger Masters of Arts. Several heads of colleges were for the poet ; but the fact that the Chancellor only recognised the candidature of Henry Boyle, the other sitting member, rather restrained the authorities from a vigorous canvass on Prior's behalf.

Talbot's earnest advice was that Prior should come to Cambridge, pitch his tent at St. John's and be his own advocate ; and that he should also have a professed agent at the college to carry on business during his absence. Only thus could he hope to defeat the redoubtable Tory. But for some reason or other, from lack either of zeal or of leisure, Matt would not go to this trouble. A fact which possibly weighed with him was that he was denied the support of the master of his own college. On 11th December Dr. Gower wrote him a letter which, almost as long as Talbot's of October, is worth reading as a dignified and beautiful piece of epistolary prose. After complimenting his correspondent (" the first buddings of those hopes, which have since so spread and flourished with universal praise, passed not unobserved by me"), he repeats the advice which he had already given in conversation : that Prior should withdraw. His chances of success were remote, and little was being done to improve them. " You speak of friends that manage your interest here ; you best know who they are, but I wonder we hear nothing of the success of their management. I do not find that the interest of either of our present representatives lessens in the least, nor that your name has been set up, or much solicitation used ; but that perhaps will not appear till the nearer occasion of it. That is not my

business." For his own part, the writer goes on, he is bound to Mr. Hammond, also a member of St. John's, whom he speaks of in terms very different from those employed by more Whiggish writers, from Talbot to Macaulay. "His conduct in the House of Commons has been generally approved by the University, which has had several occasions to observe his conduct and to experience his zeal for the interests of it. He is represented to us as one steady and unbiassed, led blindfold by no interest, party or popularity, but acting and voting whether with these or those as becomes an Englishman, faithful to the establishment in Church and State as it now stands. As thus, I doubt not, would you steer if in such a capacity. But, my friend, I know you will not desire me causelessly to desert my friend, nor change lightly, or discover levity and inconstancy." Good wishes and the assurance that his influence shall not wittingly deprive Prior of a single vote, are all that the venerable doctor can offer.<sup>1</sup>

Eight days later, and in partial if not complete consequence of Gower's letter, the poet threw up the contest.

"It is time, my good friend," he wrote to Talbot, "that I should answer yours of the 16th inst., which I will do very briefly: by telling you I have laid aside the thoughts of appearing at Cambridge, and wish very well to the University in the choice of their burgesses. You might easily have comprehended this to have been my resolution from my last letters to you, but, may be, it was not very proper for me to say so sooner. I will not trouble you with any reasonings on this occasion, since I suppose my letters may be opened and read in a combination room or two before they come to your hands. Pray assure my true friends of my hearty respects

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 430-31.



and let them know that on all occasions I am ready to serve the University in general and them in particular ; and when I have the happiness to talk with you at the corner of a good fire, we will make our reflections upon these great adventures, and you shall see me much of the same temper as I used to be.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the last of the few letters to have survived out of what was evidently a voluminous correspondence. The decision which it expresses was final, and when the elections were held a little later Prior was not among the candidates. Dr. Gower had hinted at the possibility of a future attempt. But it was nearly twenty years before the poet made his second appeal—with equally unsatisfactory results—to the suffrages of his University.

Prior sat in the Parliament that met 6th February, 1701, as member for East Grinstead. On the circumstances of his election the records are silent ; there is no official return ; while his extant correspondence, hitherto so copious, comes to an abrupt termination at the end of 1700, and is not resumed with anything like continuity until 1710, the year of that Tory revival with which, outside poetry, he has been chiefly associated. All we know is that he was elected by the interest of Lord Dorset, and that he voted for the impeachment of the lords whom Parliament held responsible for the Partition Treaty.<sup>2</sup>

The unexpected nature of the poet's one recorded participation in a division brings us face to face with the question of his politics. Not that in themselves they amounted to much. But they carried implications which it is not always easy to read. In his earlier letters, indeed, he appears almost totally unconcerned with party matters. The Whig Junto, the constitutional

<sup>1</sup> *Stowe MS.* 755, fo. 39.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of His Own Time*, p. 185 ; Montagu's memorandum.

expression of the King's will, was in power. Its members were his employers, and one of the most important, Charles Montagu, was his personal friend. All his diplomatic work was the carrying out of Whig policy. He seems to have been a Whig as a matter of course.

After the Treaty of Ryswick had been signed and he had been sent to Paris, however, he gave more attention to the state of affairs at Westminster. Some time after the Earl of Portland left the French capital he began to receive long political dissertations from his former secretary. The question of party was bothering Prior, as it has bothered so many literary men whose intellect politics have attracted, but whose taste and sense of reality the machinery of politics has offended. Among some miscellaneous and undated notes from the poet's hand occurs the following passage: "One does not know a party when one thinks one is master of it, their interests private their minds governed by the love of a woman, their subdivisions and thereupon their anger to each other greater than to any of the opposite party in general. Distractions that happen upon such misunderstandings and what the Italians call *comedia in comedia*."<sup>1</sup> This may be supplemented by his severe character-sketch of the party man in his *Essay upon Opinion*. "A party man, indeed, and such most of us are, or must be, is an animal that no commentator upon human nature can sufficiently explain. He has not his opinion, how sorry a world so ever it may be, in his own keeping. *Quo ad hoc* he is mad, must speak without believing what he understands, without enquiring he acts as implicitly according to the word of command given out by the heads of his faction as a Carthusian or a Jesuit does to the will of his Superior. The lie of the

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxi, fo. 158.

day is the rule of his life, and as his judgment depends upon that of other men, he must justify everything that his party acts with the greatest injustice, till from the degrees of warm and violent, he comes up to furious and wicked. *Foenum habet in cornu*, and everybody is obliged to yield or run from him."

In his letters to Portland, Prior is more specific. He had a definite text in the state of his country, and his experience in Holland and France had unquestionably given him a broader view than could be boasted by many a stay-at-home politician. What he wrote on 1st March, 1699, anticipates, as has been pointed out,<sup>1</sup> the ideas put forth in a famous pamphlet by a distinguished statesman who was also Prior's familiar friend: Bolingbroke's *Idea of a Patriot King*.

" . . . I have intimated to your Lordship what sudden joy some people here had upon the opiniatritry of the Parliament in England, but that joy cools a great deal. The address of the House of Commons to the King to remove Papists and discontented persons about London I have, and shall make good use of, by letting the Court of Versailles see that the peevishness of the House is very far from favouring our friends at St. Germain, and that, whilst we have such laws against King James and his adherents, and such addresses from our Parliament to put them in force, we are likely enough to preserve our liberties under his Majesty's reign and government without other strength than the united obedience and loyalty of all his subjects. This I say is the turn that must be given to our affairs here, to have them bettered in England. If I were there, I would venture to say at large to your Lordship what I just set down the *ébauche* of here.

" The people of England are wild, at ease, and separate

<sup>1</sup> By Mr. J. M. Rigg, in his introduction to *Longleat MSS.*, iii.

from the commerce and knowledge of the affairs of Europe ; some that have a good deal of wit think too speculatively, for want of experience in relation to things abroad ; many are personally malicious at the Court because they are not in it ; the ministers therefore should give his Majesty at once a plain, direct and honest account how this general bent of the nation is at present, and not tell his Majesty things by halves, letting him see the worst side of them when it is too late ; but if some of the ministers be too deep in their parties' interest to do this, his Majesty's business suffers from their partiality, and, as the Scripture says, no man can serve two masters, so no man, I am confident, can serve a King of England who ought to be master of all parties and persons in the kingdom, who is too much a slave to any party wherein he is engaged.

“ With this his Majesty will be pleased to say the kindest things imaginable to the Parliament when he grants a thing, and the most like a king when he refuses ; thus did Henry VII and Henry VIII and Elizabeth, who refused more things than any other of our princes, and yet governed us best : and every word and syllable that the King speaks bears a great weight through all Europe, particularly in this Court.

“ As to this project of an Act to restrain the number of officers in the customs, excise, etc., that shall sit in the House, it will limit the King's power more than any of his predecessors have been, and may have a worse effect in future parliaments than can be seen at present. Men of good learning and experience should be a little encouraged to take notice and talk of this in their conversations in Westminster Hall, in coffee-houses, etc. ; the ministers and great men about the King should find out such persons for this service.

“ And it should be intimated that some of these men who are most violent in this matter are breaking into our constitution as much as those who in former reigns were for repealing the penal laws and tests, it being the same thing to the nation if we are hurt by bad subjects or by a bad king, and that we suffered as much by popular rage in '45 as by arbitrary power in '88.

“ The Archbishop and those bishops who have power should hint this to the clergy, and this may be said of the Tory clergy preferably to the other, that if they are in the King's interest, they will most heartily espouse his cause. The others, though they have been active for the King, were so because they were against Popery, and thought King James most against them; but they were bred in latitudinarian principles, and are no great friends at bottom to monarchy, though in the hands of the most righteous prince that ever reigned. This will be found true by all those brought up in Bishop Burnet's sentiments; for my Lord himself, you will find that he will give *teste baissée* into everything that may please the Princess, that he may have the Duke of Gloucester more entirely his own.

“ I will only observe further on this head that the King's speech as soon almost as he was on the throne, in which he said he would sustain the greatness of the monarchy, did him more service than any speech he has made since, and that the body and commonalty of the people of England love the glory of monarchy in general, and will keep up that of the King in particular who has done such great things for us, if they are rightly managed.

“ Your Lordship sees with what nakedness and simplicity I dare open my mind to you; I dare affirm a good deal of what I say is truth, and I believe most of it practicable. I beg your Lordship not to show it to

anybody, neither to my friend Montague or to Mr. Secretary. If any improvement may be made of what I say to his Majesty's service and interest I shall account myself very happy, and I hope your Lordship knows me well enough to think that I do not write this out of a saucy desire to show myself a politician, or an opinion of my own knowledge, but in the duty, zeal and respect that becomes the least of the King's subjects and the most humble and obedient of your Lordship's servants. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

A week later Prior takes up the tale.

"Your Lordship will have the goodness to pardon my last letter, and take the freedom with which it was written to proceed from its right motive. I would not be ruined or hanged for my sentiments, so I dare only tell them to your Lordship and beg you to burn them. His Majesty, upon the many occupations he has, must (according to my wise politics) e'en take one other trouble upon him; he must be his own minister, and direct his Council, or at least some of them, what he would have done, rather than rely upon their advice as to what he should do. The Whigs have given him good words, and seem to do their best in Parliament for his interest; but if they do their best or no, or only (as I say) seem to do it is the question, since it is evident that most of those members who have not been in former parliaments, and who do in this compose that body which they call the country party, are those who have obstructed the King's business, and yet most of them are and have been always Whigs; on t'other side the Tories in these last affairs have voted against their principle, because the chief of their party are peevish, and the multitude of them follow their example, whilst these leading men are

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 319.

against the Court, right or wrong, because they are not of it : the remedy that is to be found to this evil is that in one and the other party some should be gained by his Majesty's goodness and kindness, and others made sensible of his displeasure ; this was practised by King Henry VII and Queen Elizabeth with success, who, as I observed to your Lordship, were our best princes and ruled us best. . . ."

Prior here diverges to more particular matters, mainly connected with St. Germain's, but in his concluding paragraph returns once more to his preoccupation. "The peevishness of our friends at St. Stephen's Chapel is sufficient to make any man wish for a cloister, but I hope in God your Lordship is above all such thoughts, for 'tis from such men as you that the tide must be stemmed and the waves broken : and great and good men are most necessary to the preservation of the State in the most troublesome times, so that I hope, my Lord, for all your being weary of the world, we shall long enjoy you as our patron and friend, and good men continue to be obliged to you."<sup>1</sup>

Portland did not obey Prior's request that no one but himself should see these letters. He did not, it is true, show them to Montagu or any other minister ; but, in his answer of 16th March, he wrote : "Vos lettres ne sont veues que d'un seul, là ou ils font du bien." "By that *un seul de mes amis* that saw my letters," Prior replied, "your Lordship either means yourself alone or one other who had the greatest right and reason in the world to see them." Portland continued to deal in circumlocution, "Je vous ay témoigné dans ma précédente la satisfaction que l'on a eu des sentiments que vous aves marquez sur les affaires de ce pais, qui

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 324, 325.

n'ont estez veus que de celui seul qui a le droit de les voir." In two words, the sole participant with him of Matt's wisdom was King William III.

Prior can hardly have been anything but pleased by this violation of his confidence. Portland had expressed approval of his ideas, but the stiff commendation of that very frigid Dutchman was a poor response to the appeal of enthusiasm. William would certainly like the tone of the letters. At the beginning of his reign the King had tried to govern through a ministry constructed without regard to parties. After a few years he found himself forced to rely exclusively on the Whigs because they alone would help to carry on the war, which was his chief, indeed his only, concern. In theory—though William was little prone to theorise—he was, as a King with a full appreciation of the rights of monarchy, far more in sympathy with Toryism than with the doctrinaire Whiggism which crowned and shackled him. Now if it were necessary to label Prior's political creed as expressed in the letters to Portland, we should be as nearly accurate as possible in calling it philosophic Toryism.<sup>1</sup>

There was no inconsistency between this creed and its exponent's attitude on particular questions. He believed in beneficent monarchy in general, and in William as an actual and present beneficent monarch. But, roughly speaking, the men who furthered the King's policy were Whigs, those who thwarted it Tories. During the debates of 1699 and 1700 therefore, for practical purposes, he was Whig. On the two great questions which helped the fall of the Junto, the reduction of the army<sup>2</sup> and the

<sup>1</sup> "We may, therefore, fairly suppose that these letters were not without their influence on the royal counsels as evinced in the subsequent reconstruction of the administration upon a broader bottom." [J. M. Rigg, *loc. cit.*]

<sup>2</sup> See *A New Answer to an Argument Against a Standing Army* [*Dialogues of the Dead*, p. 317]



resumption of the Irish grants, he was staunch to his early friends ; and he hotly resented the violent attacks which were being made on ministers in the House of Commons. " I must congratulate your happiness," he told Manchester in February, 1700, " that you are out of this noise and tumult, where we are tearing and destroying every man his neighbour. To-morrow is the great day, when we expect that my Lord Chancellor [Somers] will be fallen upon, though God knows what crime he is guilty of, but that of being a very great man, and a wise and upright judge. Lord Bellemont, you will read in the votes, was fallen upon to-day ; thus every day a minister, till at last we reach the King. By the next post, I shall, I presume, be able to write to you what relates to matters on your side. I am heartily tired with them on our side."<sup>1</sup>

Prior drew a clear distinction between the old ministers and those new Whig members of Parliament who were as hostile to William's policy as the " peevish " Tories themselves.<sup>2</sup> But by the beginning of 1700 Montagu had left the Treasury and Orford the Admiralty, and Somers, beaten by the fury of the Commons, was soon to surrender the Great Seal. The experiment of a composite ministry was again tried and again failed. Prior, with his monarchical ideal, longed for a strong and solid government : no matter the party label it bore so long as it worked efficiently under William's direction. " For God's sake," he wrote to Jersey in October, " let somebody or other be ordained to rule us, for at present your Godolphins and Montagus equally deny that they have anything to do with us, and I think

<sup>1</sup> Cole, *Memoirs*, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> For his opinion of the parties see the lines headed *A Fable [Dialogues of the Dead]*, p. 316]. The attribution of these lines is, however, uncertain.

we are likely to fall between two, though we might crush them both if we would act with vigour.”<sup>1</sup> This impatience with Montagu is significant. Prior was getting clear of old associations. His colleague of the *Town Mouse and Country Mouse* had developed into an extremely able but inordinately pompous official, and had little in common with the Bohemian free-lance who happened to have disguised himself in court dress. Not that this alienation was the cause of Prior’s political development. But it made such development possible. On the other hand, his friendship with Jersey, who was a Tory and as such had been Secretary of State in the reconstructed ministry of 1699, was probably not without its influence.

A letter written to Manchester in December, 1700, on the eve of his entry into Parliament shows very clearly the position at which he had arrived.

“ . . . It would be unreasonable if I did not take the opportunity of Mr. Chetwynd’s return to tell your Lordship what I know of the state of things here. That we shall have a new parliament is (I think) certain (at least, as far as I can see into the matter). What sort of parliament it may prove, I cannot any ways foresee, but sure there never was so much work, as at present, in securing parties and bribing elections: Whig and Tory are railing on both sides, so violent, that the Government may easily be overturned by the madness of either faction. We take it to be our play to do nothing against common sense or common law, and to be for those that will support the Crown rather than oblige their party; and in order to this, men are preferred who are looked upon to be honest and moderate. In this number (whether with reason or not time must decide) we comprehend our Lord Keeper and our new Secretary. Lord

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 422.

Rochester and Lord Godolphin are in the Cabinet Council ; the latter is at the head of the Treasury, the former (we take it for granted) is to go Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, though it be yet a secret. The two companies are to be brought to an agreement (if possible) and Mr. Montagu's being made a peer (we take for granted) may contribute to this union, since being in the House of Commons he would make an ill figure if he either declined to support the new or should find too great an opposition in his endeavouring so to do. As to the great affair, I presume the King will wholly defer it to the Parliament and act conjointly with their consent, which I take to be the only method. All that I can say more on this head is that I take it to be happy for the King that the will is preferred by the French at a time when everybody was peevish against the Court (though with what reason God knows) about the treaty. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

"The great affair" to which Prior refers was the question of the Spanish Succession, now more urgent than ever. Charles II was lately dead, and had left his dominions by will to Philip, Louis XIV's grandson. Louis had accepted this will ; and the Second Partition Treaty, which settled the Spanish crown on the Archduke Charles, had gone the way of the first.

None the less was the new House of Commons, which met in February with a Tory majority and Mr. Prior as member for East Grinstead, intent on punishing those responsible, or believed to be responsible, for the frustrate partition. By the second treaty, it was held, Louis would have been made predominant in Europe. The impeachment of Somers, Portland, Orford and Montagu, who was now Lord Halifax, was therefore voted.

Why Prior voted in the majority is reasonably

<sup>1</sup> Cole, *Memoirs*, p. 269.

explained by Sir James Montagu, who, seeing that his brother was a victim of the motion, is to be commended for harbouring no resentment. The negotiations for the treaty, he says, were in the main conducted by word of mouth, with Prior as intermediary between two kings who would neither of them commit themselves in writing. This was while Prior was alone in Paris after Jersey's departure and before Manchester's arrival. The whole truth of the matter was known, therefore, to few people besides the two kings and the secretary: so that when the Commons decided to impeach the ministers, they were attacking four men of whom three had been in entire ignorance of the treaty until long after it was signed and had disapproved of it when they had learned its purport. Portland alone was in the secret. Nevertheless the king decided to let his old servants take the blame for a measure of which he himself was the author, and which he already regretted. "And upon this conjunction of affairs Mr. Prior has often owned that he was more embarrassed, and less knew what to do than in any transaction that happened to concern him either before or afterwards, for upon the one hand he had been entrusted by two very great princes with the management of a secret transaction, which was not only disavowed by the French king when there appeared a will more in his favour, but was in a great measure disowned by his master, King William, when he saw the English nation were dissatisfied with it, so, on the other hand, he saw the blame of the management laid upon those who he was certain had had no share in the negotiation, and such who were of the number of his greatest friends and well-wishers." In this dilemma he decided that the King must be shielded at all costs. Sir James Montagu, though he does not commit himself to approval

of this step, admits that "very many honest gentlemen who were well-wishers to King William and his government were of opinion that it was much better for the servants to have taken upon themselves the blame (though in strictness they were not deserving of it) than to have it rest wholly upon the person of the King by making it known that he, with the assistance of a very few of his subjects, had entered upon and negotiated an affair of the utmost consequence, not only to England but to all Europe, without imparting his thoughts to those who were entrusted with the management of all public affairs."<sup>1</sup> What Sir James did not, of course, know, was that Prior was not deciding on a mere momentary expediency, but found himself faced with a problem implicit in ideas which he had long been excogitating. We can well believe he found his position embarrassing. It was not a fair test of his theory of kingship. Many elements weighed in his decision. But political principle, expediency and self-interest—the innate desire to stand well with both king and majority—proved heavier than common honesty and the ties of friendship.

The couplet from *The Conversation*,

Matthew, who knew the whole intrigue,  
Ne'er much approved that mystic league,

which is usually quoted in this connection, is really beside the mark. Prior's opinion of the treaty itself had little influence on his vote. He may have intended the lines to justify his conduct to a world which did not hold all the clues; but it should be remembered that he put them into the mouth of an ignorant know-all.

This affair naturally provoked a rupture with Lord Halifax. To his credit, however, the statesman never

<sup>1</sup> See Dobson, *Selected Poems of Matthew Prior*, pp. 217 seqq. quoting Montagu's memorandum.

sought revenge. Although estranged, he remained Prior's well-wisher, and many years later a complete reconciliation took place.

A word may here be said of the poet's relations with Portland. They were complicated by his relations with Albemarle. For between those two Dutch bearers of English titles there was hostile rivalry.

For many years Portland had his master's undivided affection and confidence. He advised his policy and put it into practice. To all intents and purposes, he was chief minister of the Crown. Then came Keppel, his younger and more attractive compatriot, who with none of Portland's ability won an equal measure of the royal favour. Portland was furiously jealous. He would not share his position, and, for all the efforts of William, who really loved him, eventually retired from the Court. A hard and ungracious man, he refused the King's advances, and the friendship of a lifetime was broken.

In this unhappy business Prior took Albemarle's side.<sup>1</sup> He confessed frankly that he preferred to follow the rising star; but we know that he considered himself Albemarle's debtor. To Portland he ever professed great regard, offered him the best fruits of his wisdom and observation, and condoled with him on his annoyances in the sincerest terms. It is difficult to believe that his letter of sympathy when he learned of the earl's retirement is not honest; but he certainly wrote less respectfully of "Swagger" than to him. If they ever came into contact after the impeachment division is not certain; for shortly afterwards Portland disappeared from English history.

<sup>1</sup> Macaulay, v, 187: the historian reports a conversation (as usual without references) which reads much more like Macaulay's diction than Prior's.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE POET AND THE MARLBOROUGHS

PUBLIC events moved swiftly in 1701. The impeachment voted by the Commons was quashed by the Lords. Then came news that James II was dead and that Louis XIV had acknowledged his son to be King of England. The war which had been simmering since Louis had accepted the Spanish king's will was now inevitable. Parliament was dissolved in July, and a new one summoned. The returns showed a slight Whig majority, but there was little to choose between Whig and Tory on the score of martial ardour. In the midst of his preparations to take the field William died. Anne ascended the throne and Marlborough took command of the army.

It does not appear that Prior sought election either to the last parliament of William or the first of his successor. Possibly he felt his position too ambiguous. Unfortunately, for the next few years our news of him is very scanty. The flood of his epistolary outpourings ceased with the necessity of writing. Although he rarely failed to enliven an official letter with some pleasant excursion, or at any rate to flavour it with witty comment, he did not cultivate the art for its own sake.

Some time before 1706 he bought himself a house in Duke Street, Westminster, which was later to become a meeting-place for intriguing Tories. Thence he sallied forth to the duties of the Board of Trade<sup>1</sup> or the pleasures

<sup>1</sup> With much the same reward as he had got at the Hague and in Paris. In April, 1703, the commissioners were six quarters in arrear for salary. Their complaint was laconically endorsed, "They have as much in proportion as the other officers" [*Treasury Papers*, 1702-7, p. 136].

of the town. His life at this date was one of very minor eventfulness.

In face of Marlborough's astonishing generalship, the vow of abstinence from verse which he had made after writing the *Carmen Seculare* was soon broken. He turned once more to worship the rising star. Blenheim inspired him to *A Letter to Monsieur Boileau-Despreaux*, whom, remembering their intercourse in Paris, he addresses as

old friend, old foe (for such we are  
Alternate, as the chance of peace and war).

Just as in the *Ballad on the Taking of Namur*, he employs the light weapon of banter; but while in the earlier poem the banter is for France alone, in the later he turns it also on himself, and does not altogether spare the heroic muse. It is here that the famous lines occur:—

I ne'er was master of the tuneful trade.  
Or the small genius which my youth could boast,  
In prose and business lies extinct and lost.

Nevertheless, two years later he celebrated Ramillies in strains proper to a "professed panegyric poet," as he had once called himself. This time, abandoning the couplet, he turned to the ode, taking Horace for his pattern and adapting the Spenserian stanza to his requirements. He even, "to make the colouring look more like Spenser's," made use of a few of the more or less obsolete words which had struck him in the *Fairy Queen*. Needless to say, the thirty-five pompous stanzas "humbly inscribed to the Queen" have about as little of the great Elizabethan's quality as verse could well have.

These poems were duly sent out to Marlborough and duly appreciated. Their author was not left unrewarded. Dr. Gower, acknowledging a copy of the Ramillies poem from Thriplow near Cambridge, concludes:



"It continues still to be the most agreeable entertainment I meet with in this pleasant place, which affords me the best I enjoy anywhere. I offer the same to my visitants too, who accept it as such, for though they come no strangers to your ode, it is fresh entertainment to read it again, repeat out of it, and discourse concerning it. The particular interest I have always claimed in the author, and my having it from his own hands seem to allow me a more than ordinary concern in the applause and praises that are paid him on this occasion. It would be strange if such a performance should not meet with more than praise expressed by words, or not procure to its author something else besides honour and immortality."<sup>1</sup>

This final prognostication proved correct. Writing to congratulate the Duke on his victory in May, 1706, Prior addresses him in fulsome terms as his "patron and protector" and thanks him for mentioning "an affair so small as my fortune" to the Lord Treasurer.<sup>2</sup> To this Marlborough despatched a brief and business-like reply, dated from Aerzeele, 14th June (*new style*).

"Your letter of congratulation on a late victory, which I meet in my way to the Hague, afforded me a very agreeable entertainment, for which I return you thanks, and pray you will believe me always with truth your most humble servant."<sup>3</sup>

When his poem was ready Prior acknowledged this note in a covering letter.

"The inclosed contains the best answer I can make to your Grace's letter from Arzele, and to all your favours while you were in England. I own to your Grace that 'tis time for me to quit poetry, but my zeal for her

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 435.

<sup>2</sup> *Coxe, Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough*, ii, 358.

<sup>3</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 434.

Majesty's glory, and my obligations to you, my Lord, are eternal. I assure myself, that your Grace will find this *written from the heart*, and I tell everybody in my preface when I intend to write again in verse. As to prose, I always attend your Grace's order."<sup>1</sup>

Prior concluded his original preface to the poem as follows: "And hereupon I declare that if the reader will be good enough to pardon me this excursion, I will neither trouble him with poem or preface any more, till my Lord Duke of Marlborough gets another victory, greater than those of Blenheim and Ramillies." Subsequently, for obvious reasons, he made a considerable alteration in this peroration; and the reference in his letter to Marlborough would not be understood by one who only knew the final version.

If any man is to be judged by his friends, Prior certainly was; and with Marlborough recommending him to Godolphin in the year 1706, it may safely be assumed that he was now definitely identified with the moderate Tories. In spite of his intellectual distaste for party, he was not one who could breathe long in the rarified air of political idealism. He needed personal alliances and concrete issues. It was inevitable that, having broken with the Whigs, he should sooner or later adhere to one of the Tory factions. Even more significant than his connection with the two leaders, both of whom were far from being strict party men, was his friendship with Sir Thomas Hanmer, who was destined to become a leading spirit in that powerful Tory organisation, the October Club, and eventually head of the Hanoverian Tories, Bolingbroke's "Whimsicals," in the House of Commons. Of the poet's old Whig acquaintances, little

<sup>1</sup> Coxe, ii, 359 n.

more is heard. Pope says that he "did not care to converse with any Whigs after" his conversion.

It is from his few letters to Hanmer that we get almost all the light that can be thrown on his private life during the first half of the reign of Queen Anne. One, written 8th August, 1706, is invaluable characteristic. Prior had sent Hanmer a copy of the *Ramillies* ode, and the baronet had responded by inviting him to Euston, which was his home by virtue of his marriage with the Dowager Duchess of Grafton. To which the poet :—

"The very reason of my not answering you letter sooner is, that I was out of town when it arrived here, so all the excuses I can take for not coming to Euston from my attendance at the board, or my care of the plantations, will be found frivolous and scandalous ; about a fortnight hence, therefore, all fourberie apart, I will certainly mount my terrestrial steed, and you shall see a gentle squire come pricking o'er the plain. A fortnight hence ! if Mrs. Ramsay makes the calculation, she will find that this falls into Bartholomew-fair-time, and consequently my passion for her is very boiling, since I can leave the rope-dancers' booth, my dear Betty in the city, and pig and pork, for her, an arbour and a Suffolk dumpling : so pray, sir, desire her to be patient and discreet, and on this condition my person is at her service. I am not master of eloquence enough to thank you for the kindness of your invitation, at least I will lose no merit I can have to Mrs. Ramsay, by confessing I have a mind to come on any other account than that of my laying myself at her feet. I think that last sentence was gallant.—I have no news to tell you. The west winds have driven our descent back, and we do not know if we shall first hear of a battle in Spain, Italy or Flanders. God send us

success, and keep me long in your good graces, which next and immediately under those of the above-mentioned Mrs. Ramsay, I shall always strive to improve."<sup>1</sup>

A fortnight passed, and Prior not having redeemed his promise of a visit to Euston, Hanmer remonstrated in a tone of banter to match the poet's.

If it were his work on the commission of trade and plantations which detained him, Prior was soon to be relieved of that hindrance to his amusements. After 1705, when a new parliament with a Whig majority had been elected, the complexion of the Government gradually changed. Godolphin and Marlborough were still at the head of it, and still called themselves Tories; but they had found, as William had found before them, that they got a great deal more support for a war policy from the opposite party than from their own. They therefore entered into friendly relations with the leaders of the former, and ousted the more extreme Tories from office.

This change proved unfortunate for Prior. His brief appearance in Parliament was remembered against him, and when a new commission of trade and plantations was appointed, his name was omitted. "Things change, and times change, and men change," Godolphin told him when he dismissed him.<sup>2</sup>

The poet's case was serious. He had now only his

<sup>1</sup> *Hanmer Corr.*, p. 101. The editor, Sir Henry Bunbury, appends the following note: "I imagine that Mrs. Ramsay, mentioned in this and in many other letters addressed to Sir T. Hanmer, was a friend and very frequently the companion of the Duchess of Grafton; and that she is the lady whom Swift notices in his *Journal*, 30th December, 1712. He says, 'Duke of Ormond, Lord Arran, and I, dined privately to-day at an old servant's house of his. One Mrs. Ramsay dined with us; an old lady of about fifty-five, that we are all very fond of.'"

<sup>2</sup> Authorities vary as to whether he lost his berth in 1706 or 1707. He was certainly on the board at the end of August, 1706, and off it by the end of April, 1707, when the names of the new commissioners were published in the *Gazette*.

fellowship, an unconsidered trifle, on which to depend. In his straits he was offered and very nearly accepted a post which strikes one as curiously incongruous. The story is best told in his own words, for he was a master of such narration. Writing to Hanmer, 24th June, 1707, after apologising for his lack of news—"my own ugly affairs having taken up my thoughts, and an ill state of health having brought me to a great deal of indifference"—he proceeds:—

"By Dyer's leave, the Bishop of Winchester very kindly offered me the name of secretary to him and his diocese, which I was told was a kind of sinecure, would be of some value to me, and still left me the entire liberty of life: in a few days the good nature of the town, at least that part of it that wished me no good, carried a glorious story, that I had a provision of six hundred pounds a year settled on me, was to live at Farnham with the bishop, had abandoned all thoughts of ever serving or depending on the Court, had turned my thoughts wholly towards orders, was to have all the ecclesiastical preferment the prelate could heap upon me, and in the meantime, was to set up High Church, and cut down all the bishop's woods into faggots to burn dissenters: this civil turn might on one hand very easily have ruined me at Court, from whence I had very good reason to expect some present favour, and might have hindered my return into business hereafter; and, on the other hand, upon a nearer view of the thing I found it not considerable, and such as neither could or ought to be managed by deputation; it comprehended the business of a whole diocese, and was to be managed by some person who should wholly apply himself to it; and, however great my Lord Bishop's intended kindness and complaisance might be to me, it was pretty reasonable his

secretary should always be near him : upon these views and reflexions I declined the offer, which (to tell the truth) I had too suddenly embraced : but I think I have done it in such a manner as lets him know that I have a real obligation to him, and a great zeal for his service, and I think the business will terminate so as that I may keep his friendship, and Mr. Skelton [? Shelton] be his secretary : which I think will be very proper for his lordship's affairs, as well as my own ; and if an ingenious man and a good friend finds his advantage (to which indeed I had an eye in the beginning of my project), I find no harm in the whole matter : in the meanwhile I have expedited all his seals and affairs in the offices at Court, have waited on him to Windsor at his paying his homage and receiving his prelacy of the Garter, as I will likewise do to Farnham, and endeavour to carry the matter so as not to lose his friendship, nor engage in an employment which I find not proper for me. You cannot imagine, sir, the noise this thing has made, the various talk and censure that have been raised upon it, and the secret trouble it has given me : but so it was ; too inconsiderately, perhaps, begun, and therefore very soon to be brought off. . . ."<sup>1</sup>

*Parlons d'autres choses*—a favourite phrase of his—Prior goes on, and turns to literary matters. But the story that he was to take orders enjoyed, thanks to Dyer's News-Letters, a few weeks of life. It had been in circulation more than a month before it came to the ears of the Bishop of Winchester, who promptly wrote in mock alarm to accuse the poet of designs on his see. This prelate was the celebrated Sir Jonathan Trelawney, who, as Bishop of Bristol, had been one of the Seven

<sup>1</sup> *Hammer Corr.*, p. 108.

Bishops, and is the subject of Hawker of Morwenstow's famous pseudo-contemporary ballad.

It appears not only from his own letter to Hanmer, but also from the bishop's letter to him, that Prior, though refusing the secretaryship, had rendered himself liable to certain demands on his service.<sup>1</sup> But, whatever the arrangement may have been, it can only have been temporary. His thoughts had turned once more to a continental employment. As he told Hanmer, he had reason to expect some favour from the Court, by which he meant Marlborough. The favour in question was possibly the embassy at Brussels, whence his old friend and rival, George Stepney, was returning on account of his health.

In a letter of 25th August, the Duke refers to this project: if Stepney should recover, he was to go back to Brussels; otherwise Prior's application would be favourably considered.<sup>2</sup> But although Stepney came home only to die, Matt was not sent to replace him. Nor were his designs on the Hague any more successful. It was probably at this time that Marlborough procured him a pension of £500 a year, a mere dole, though a pretty substantial one, for the confidential agent of kings.

This was, indeed, a very different state of affairs from the days when Prior had had secretaryships at command. In November, 1708, when the great duke was in England, the poet was still his suitor. Now Florence was the goal of his ambition, with the alternative of restoration to his place on the trade commission. His tone had become almost abject. The thought that he was losing touch with public life drove him to depths of importunate flattery. Unfortunately for himself, he had

<sup>1</sup> According to Lord Ailesbury Trelawney gave him board, lodging and a handsome stipend for the sake of his company.

<sup>2</sup> Marlborough, *Despatches*, iii, 530.

offended the puissant and virulent Duchess Sarah. She believed, though there was apparently no just grounds for the belief, that he had written a libel on her. He protested his innocence, waxing eloquent of the pathos of his position.

"If in my own person I may say what I most desire," he told the Duke, "it is that I may have the liberty of laying myself at my Lady Duchess's feet, and of begging her to hear me demonstrate my innocence as to anything that might have offended her, and to accept my service in whatever may hereafter oblige her: in one word, my Lord, to shew her Grace the contents of this letter. I have lost my employment after sixteen years' service; fare it well. I still subsist, God Almighty bless your goodness and bounty for it. I desire no more of my Lady Duchess than that she would not think me a villain and a libeller. I beg no other *eclaircissement* of what is past than that she would forget it; and with the most solemn protestation I aver that I have ever esteemed her as one of the best of women, and would justify that esteem with my life, which, at present, is no great compliment, for, in truth, I grow pretty weary of it. Your Grace will be pleased to indulge this request to the most unhappy, but the most faithful, of your servants."<sup>1</sup>

This appeal was not without effect on the Duchess. From the following letter, it is evident that, for the time being, she ceased to consider Prior an enemy. When the *Poems on Several Occasions* were published in 1709, the author wrote to the Duke:—

"I presume to let your Grace know that in this unhappy leisure, from which I beg so heartily to be released, I have collected into one volume whatever I

<sup>1</sup> *Private Correspondence of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough*, ii, 407.



had heretofore writ. The only valuable pieces are those in which I have endeavoured to mention the great Duke of Marlborough as I ought, and the obligations which Britain has to her general's conduct. My Lady Duchess has been pleased to receive the book kindly, and has ordered Mr. B. to let me know she is satisfied I never did deserve her displeasure, and her Grace's justice is such that all obstacles on that side are perfectly removed. I am very sure (if there be occasion) she will be so far from opposing my being restored, that she will assist it.

"I beg your Grace's pardon for the length of my letter, but, my Lord, my gratitude is always talkative and importunate.

"I wish your Grace all the health, prosperity and success that can contribute to make a prince happy." <sup>1</sup>

If Marlborough ever troubled to read the dedication of *Poems on Several Occasions*, he must have reflected with some amusement on the shameless sycophancy of the second sentence of Prior's letter to himself, and on the superior honesty of the last paragraph but one. "Talkative and importunate" the poet certainly was. Nevertheless, he failed to get what he wanted from the man whom he had flattered in several poems and innumerable letters. At the beginning of 1710 he made another effort. Once more there was a vacancy at the Board of Trade, and Prior hoped to fill it. The Duke of Montagu recommended him to Godolphin, who expressed himself favourably, and suggested that Prior should write to Marlborough. A letter was accordingly addressed to "my great patron." But there the matter ended.

There, also, it appears, ended the intercourse between the poet and the general. Soon they were to be fighting

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 410.

in opposite camps. Prior has often been blamed for this rupture. It has been asserted that he turned against Marlborough when he found that the Duke would do nothing for him, and he has also been accused of deserting him in the hour of his eclipse. The two charges came to much the same thing: that Prior dropped his friendships when they ceased to be profitable. Unfortunately his record is not invulnerable to such shafts. It is undeniable either that his last extant letter to Marlborough was an unsuccessful appeal, or that it was almost contemporaneous with the fall of the Godolphin, which is to say the Marlborough, ministry. It is equally undeniable that new stars were on the orient horizon. Nevertheless, there were extenuating circumstances. Condemnation of his conduct, as well in 1701 as in 1710, has been based on a mistaken conception of the date and nature of his Toryism. What that was, an attempt has already been made to show. In the case of his desertion of the Whigs in 1701, it has been demonstrated that, though self-interest was an element in his conduct, another and perhaps more potent element was the logical development of his political ideas. So, now, his position was consistent with his sincere convictions. When Prior first came under Marlborough's notice, patron and place-hunter were both Tories; at the beginning of 1710, Prior was still a Tory, but Marlborough had become a Whig. It is certainly not to be overlooked that their relations continued for more than a year after Marlborough's open conversion to the party which would fill the war-chest. But when Prior broke them, he was not so much an apostate as a returned prodigal. Honestly a Tory, his love of profit had held him too long to a connection which had become unequivocally bewhigged. In joining St. John and Harley, he took his proper place.

Though he may have been venal and ready to compromise with his convictions, he was not a weather-cock. His politics were not dictated by opportunism, but opportunism discredited his politics. He is to be blamed less for deserting Marlborough when he did, than for having licked his boots so long.

The Duchess has expressed her sense of his conduct with frequency and freedom. In the *Characters of Her Contemporaries*, she classed him and Swift together as "men of wit and parts ready to prostitute all they had in the service of well-rewarded scandal, being both of a composition past the weakness of blushing, or of stumbling at anything for the interest of their new masters." After dealing emphatically with the greater of this pretty pair, she goes on to mention Prior's supposed share in "those vile *Examiners*, in which the Duke and Duchess of Marlborough were so beyond all measure and example abused." This is a matter which will soon demand our attention, but it may be noted in passing that during the four years of Tory supremacy Prior acquired a reputation as a pamphleteer which nothing whatever remains to justify. The Duchess's suspicions against the poet as her own traducer, lulled as they had been by the gift of a book of verse, were fanned into flame again by what she considered his desertion of her husband. She quotes his letter on the subject, mentions the pension of £500 a year, and is eloquent on his ingratitude "to him, to whom he had long owed his very subsistence. But," she concludes, "it is enough to say that the first part of his education was in a tavern, and that he had a soul as low as his education, incapable of anything truly great or honourable."<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere she adopts the same tone. "When

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-140.

Prior was turned out of a place he did not deserve, the Duke got the Queen to give Prior a place of £500 per annum. Prior was a boy who waited at the Rhenish wine-house, whom the late Lord Dorset put to school out of charity. The Queen let Prior read the letters to her, and when she had not time took them from him and gave them the next time." <sup>1</sup> In an endorsement on one of Prior's complimentary letters to Marlborough—the endorsement obviously having been written long after the letter—the Duchess varies the value of the pension. "'Tis certain this man has writ some of the scandalous libels of the Duke of Marlborough and me, though he had a pension of four hundred pounds a year from the Duke of Marlborough, when he pretended to be in his interest." <sup>2</sup> To these evidences of a vivacious lady's animosity may be added a note which Prior himself wrote on a letter which he had addressed to her. "Mem.: She sent back the letter unopened and said she was sure, let Mr. Prior write what he would, he could not wish well to her and her family." <sup>3</sup>

But these amenities belong to the year 1710 and afterwards. Meanwhile, after his expulsion from the Board of Trade, Prior was living cheerfully enough, in spite of his moans to Marlborough; drinking Hanmer's health *ad hilaritatem* with Dr. Robert Freind, who was to write the epitaphs both of his wine-fellow and of their toast; taking the waters of Bath; and looking out for "a Welsh widow with a good jointure." A matter of greater importance—for Bath could not give him permanent

<sup>1</sup> *Hist. MSS. Comm.*, 8th rep., App. i, 15 a. The information about the Queen's letters is curious and unsupported by other evidence. The paper is dated 3rd December, 1710.

<sup>2</sup> *Private Correspondence of Sarah Duchess of Marlborough*, ii, 408.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in MS. catalogue of Prior papers at Longleat.

health nor Hanmer find him a wife—he was preparing a volume of poems for the printer.

\* \* \* \* \*

Prior is now remembered almost exclusively as a poet, yet so far, in these pages, he has made but a fitful appearance in that capacity. His own verdict that he was “only a poet by accident” has almost been justified, though really as partial on the one side as Pope’s of “nothing out of poetry” on the other. An inveterate rhymster, he was always deprecating the habit. His first book of collected poems was issued with excuses and apologies.

Perhaps his most candid utterance on the subject is to be found in the *Heads for a Treatise upon Learning*, which was only given to the world a few years ago. “As to poetry, I mean the writing of verses,” he there says, “it is another thing [than prose] : I would advise no man to attempt it except he cannot help it, and if he cannot it is in vain to dissuade him from it. This genius is perceived so soon even in our childhood, and increases so strongly in our youth, that he who has it will never be brought from it, do what you will : Cowley felt it at ten years old, and Waller could not get rid of it at sixty. *Poeta morietur* may be said as truly as *Poeta nascitur*. The greatest care imaginable must be taken of those who have this particular bent of thought, they must begin soon and continue long in the course of some severer studies. As to my own part, I found this impulse very soon, and shall continue to feel it as long as I can think ; I remember nothing further in life than that I made verses ; I chose Guy of Warwick for my first hero and killed Colborn the Giant before I was big enough for Westminster School. But I had two accidents in youth which hindered me from being quite

possessed with the muse : I was bred in a college where prose was more in fashion than verse, and as soon as I had taken my first degree was sent the King's Secretary to the Hague : There I had enough to do in studying French and Dutch and altering my Terentian and Virgilian style into that of articles, conventions, and memorials : so that poetry, which by the bent of my mind might have become the business of my life, was by the happiness of my education only the amusement of it."

In spite of his modesty, which was genuine enough, Prior rapidly gained considerable reputation as a poet. As early as 1695, when he had really printed very little, his silence after Queen Mary's death was the subject of comment and protest. By 1707 it had become worth while to pirate his work. In that year there appeared, therefore,—“Printed for R. Burrough, and J. Baker, at the *Sun* and *Moon* in Cornhill, and E. Curll, at the *Peacock* without *Temple Bar*”—a slim volume, entitled *Poems on Several Occasions : consisting of Odes, Satyrs and Epistles ; with some Select Translations and Imitations*. Three lines from Roscommon were printed on the title-page:—

Be not too rigidly censorious ;  
A string may jar, in the best master's hand,  
And the most skilful archer miss his aim.

The collection, which was gathered from the various *Miscellanies* and issues of single poems, was introduced with the following “Advertisement from the Publisher” :—

“The name of Mr. Prior, is a more satisfactory recommendation of the following sheets to those gentlemen who are judges of poetry, than whatever can be offered in their behalf.

“All that I here endeavoured, (and which by the assistance of some friends, I have accomplished) is, that the several pieces

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herein contained, should appear more perfect and correct by this publication, than they have hitherto done elsewhere ; and that no copy should be inserted, till I was assured of its being genuine."

It will be observed that there is no suggestion that the publication had been sanctioned by the author.

There is no evidence that Prior made any immediate sign that he was aware of this impertinence. But, deciding that if the world was to have his poetry, it had better have it from the proper source, in 1709 he got Tonson to publish an authentic collection of *Poems on Several Occasions*. In his preface he specifically brands the earlier volume as both inaccurate and partially spurious. "A collection of poems has lately appeared under my name, though without my knowledge, in which the publisher has given me the honour of some things that did not belong to me ; and has transcribed others so imperfectly, that I hardly knew them to be mine. This has obliged me, in my own defence, to look back upon some of those lighter studies, which I ought long since to have quitted, and to publish an indifferent collection of poems, for fear of being thought the author of a worse.

"Thus I beg pardon of the public for reprinting some pieces, which, as they came singly from their first impression, have (I fancy) lain long and quietly in Mr. Tonson's shop ; and adding others to them, which were never before printed, and might have lain as quietly, and perhaps more safely, in a corner of my own study. . . ."

As already pointed out, these excuses are unnecessary but characteristic. What is more interesting is the total insufficiency of the alleged reason for publication. The 1707 volume presented a very fair text of seventeen poems, all of which were undoubtedly genuine. Mr.

Waller, the highest authority on the text of Prior, has shown that in many cases this edition differs from the authentic ones in a lesser degree than those differ among themselves. Moreover, the attribution of fifteen of the seventeen poems has never been in doubt. Some of them were already well known, and others reappeared in the authorised edition. The two uncertain items were those which held first place in the volume: *A Satire on Modern Translators* and *The Seventh Satire of Juvenal Imitated*. Curll mentions them particularly in the preface to the volume which he published in 1722, immediately after the poet's death, as omitted from his acknowledged works "on account of a few nipping turns upon two noblemen, lately deceased." The evidence of Curll, as publisher of the 1707 collection, is discredited, but Mr. Waller found at Longleat a printed copy of the second of these, with an unpublished post-script signed by Prior; while the *Satire on Modern Translators*, of which there is also a printed copy at Longleat, is clearly the subject of the early letter to Dr. Humphrey Gower quoted in this biography.

Prior, therefore, was prevaricating or, rather, deliberately lying. Nor can we blame him. Unscrupulous people like Curll the printer must be fought with their own weapons. Curll's prefaces were more veracious than Prior's, but his action was utterly dishonest. He had published over their author's name, and without sanction, poems which had originally appeared anonymously.<sup>1</sup> In such a case, a poet is perfectly justified in

<sup>1</sup> The *Satire on Modern Translators* was printed in *Poems on Affairs of State* (1697), where it is dated 1684—"possibly erroneously," says Mr. Waller, though the letter to Gower shows that this date was at least approximately correct. In an edition of the *Poems on Affairs of State*, dated 1698, the satire is said to be "by Mr. P——" [see Waller, *Dialogues of the Dead*, pp. vii, 388, 389]. It does not appear how the *Juvenal* first got into circulation.



denying his offspring ; though the denial may not consist with that frankness which we associate with the noblest natures.

There can be no doubt that the pieces which Prior particularly wished to disown were the two satires and the *First Epistle to Fleetwood Shephard* ; which last, according to Curll, " his great modesty prevailed upon him to withdraw, only upon there being in the close of that piece an innocent joke upon Mr. Montagu, late Earl of Halifax." Frankly a courtier, he was very much afraid of hurting people's feelings and was therefore chary of satire. A passage in the *Heads for a Treatise upon Learning*, immediately consecutive to that already quoted, gives his views on the subject : " And in this too having the prospect of some little fortune to be made, and friendship to be cultivated with the great men, I did not launch much out into satire, which however agreeable for the present to the writers or encouragers of it does in time do neither of them good considering the uncertainty of fortune, and the various change of ministry, where every man as he resents may punish in his turn of greatness, and that in England a man is less safe as to politics than he is in a barque upon the coast in regard to the change of the wind, and the danger of shipwreck."

Prior appropriately dedicated the *Poems on Several Occasions* to the young Earl of Dorset, the son of his first patron, who had died in 1706. The dedication, which is practically a biography of the late earl, is an admirable specimen of its kind. A panegyric, it naturally lays stress on its subject's virtues, but the flattery is not outrageous, being kept in check by an excellent sense of proportion. Like all Prior's prose writings, this epistle is lucid and pleasant to read.

The collection itself, which was much larger than its illegitimate predecessor, need not be criticised in detail here. It contained the occasional poems, from the college exercise on Exodus iii, 14, to the Ramillies ode, including the *Carmen Seculare* in Dibben's Latin version as well as in the original; the Fontainesque fables of Hans Carvel, Paulo Purganti, and the Ladel; and various odes and songs. The longest piece in the book is *Henry and Emma*, that improvement on the inimitable *Nut Brown Maid* which indicates with such emphasis the gulf between the taste of the eighteenth century and of our own day.

## CHAPTER VII

### MATT'S PEACE

THE story of the last years of Queen Anne has often been told, nor is it here to be repeated at length. It is only our concern in so far as it was Prior's. But at that date the poet's connection with public affairs was more intimate than at any other period of his life. It is necessary, therefore, to enter somewhat more fully into the domain of political history than we have hitherto done.

When in the course of the year 1708 the ministry purged itself of its last Tory elements, Godolphin and Marlborough, great as their power still was, created against themselves a dangerous opposition, which was by no means confined to Parliament. The war was growing rapidly more unpopular; the pinch of poverty was not to be lessened by contemplation of the brilliant campaigning which caused it; there was a strong feeling that Marlborough was continuing the war rather for his own benefit than for that of England, and that an advantageous peace should, as it very well could, have been concluded after the great victory at Ramillies in 1706. And if the country—so far as the country was in those days capable of an opinion—was dissatisfied with the ministerial policy, the Queen was no less dissatisfied. So long as she had been under the influence of the redoubtable Duchess of Marlborough, the duke (except for his thralldom to the same beautiful fury) had been omnipotent. Lately, however, alien influences had crept into the Court. The duchess's domineering temper had defeated itself and driven the poor Queen into the arms of a more restful friend, Mrs. Masham, who, though

working by subtler ways, did not take long to establish herself in the position which Sarah Jennings had held since she and the Princess Anne had been girls together. Mrs. Masham, moreover, was cousin to that ambitious and intriguing politician, Robert Harley, who, working through her on the Queen's innate Toryism, established himself in the position of confidential adviser once held by Marlborough.

Meanwhile, external events were making for the same results as public opinion and court intrigue. The campaign of 1707 made no such appeal to the imagination as had those which culminated at Blenheim and Ramillies. In 1708, it is true, Oudenarde was fought and won, and a Whig majority was returned to Parliament. But the confidence which Whigs may have felt in these events was ill-founded. In 1709 negotiations for a peace were opened at the Hague, but Louis XIV, ready as he was to come to terms, could not accept the inordinate and insulting conditions of the Allies. A fresh campaign was opened, and resulted in the disastrous victory of Malplaquet, which brought more of mourning than of rejoicing to Englishmen. It may be noted, in passing, that neither Oudenarde nor Malplaquet was celebrated by Prior.

Next year came the crisis. Two events, a second abortive peace conference and the ill-judged impeachment of a popular Tory preacher, Dr. Sacheverell, brought the unpopularity of the Government to a head. It was clear that the ministry as at present constituted could stand no longer. Harley, however, the man of the moment, was not for a complete change. In spite of the failure of such schemes in the past, he advised a coalition, a ministry chosen irrespective of party.

Circumstances and the Queen proved too strong for

him. In April, after a violent scene, Anne dismissed her old friend, the Duchess of Marlborough, from her presence for ever ; though the Mistress of Robes, with characteristic preference of hard cash to the intangible quality of dignity, continued to draw her salary for nearly a year longer. In June the Queen dismissed Marlborough's son-in-law, Sunderland, from the Secretaryship of State ; in August she made Godolphin break the Treasurer's staff which, whatever his shortcomings, he had wielded since the beginning of her reign with immaculate honesty and an efficiency rarely rivalled in the annals of his office. In September she dissolved Parliament. Meanwhile Harley, who, the Treasury being in commission, had been officially Chancellor of the Exchequer but actually head of the Government since Godolphin's fall, was vainly trying to form his coalition. His difficulty was that he could get no Whigs to join him. One by one, therefore, the offices of State were given to Tories ; and when the new Parliament showed a strong Tory majority, the triumph of the party, in spite of its leader, was complete. Henry St. John, who, like Harley, had been turned out of office in February, 1708, was one of the Secretaries of State. Of these two men history has much to say : of their colleagues, very little.

It was not long before Matthew Prior felt the effects of the change in the political atmosphere. " The making Mr. Prior the first fruit of a restoration," Lord Weymouth wrote to Harley, 24th July, 1710, " shows that commission will be continued." His friends wrote to congratulate him on his restoration to the Board of Trade, which had been announced in " both foreign and home prints." All this, however, was a little premature ; for in the middle of September, Mr. Secretary St. John wrote to him :—

" I suppose you are by this time returned from the

country, and therefore I send this note to acquaint you that the Queen has been spoken to in your affair.

"She is inclined to show you her favour, and is indifferent which commission she places you in ; so that if you settle your business with the ministers, I believe it will meet with no obstruction above." <sup>1</sup>

The letter ends with expressions of esteem and willingness to serve.

The commission to which Prior was eventually appointed was not that of trade and plantations, but that of customs ; nor was his appointment immediate, being delayed, no doubt, until it had been decided whether he was needed for other work. He was still expecting it in June, 1711 ; in October the Queen promised it ; but it was not until 28th January, 1712, that he made his first appearance at the Board, and was greeted by one of his colleagues, H. Crispe, in the following elegant lines :—

Will then the Muse, the great *Priorian* Muse,  
Stoop to the Hurries of our cumber'd House ?  
Her self to Business, and the Board, apply  
Intense, and Numbers not harmonious try ?  
Blest be the Change ! henceforth Deceit and Fraud  
Shall fly these Walls, by so much Virtue aw'd,  
Such penetrating Quickness to detect  
Abuses, such Resolv'dness to correct.  
Now Just and Right shall be no strangers here,  
More our *Great Master's* Honour, less his Fear.  
So when *Apollo* kept *Admetus's* sheep,  
The Royal Owner could securely sleep ;  
Still all was safe ; the Heavenly Watchman's Eye  
Ne'er left his Flocks to rav'nous Wolves a Prey.

Muses are bold Adventurers, their Freight  
Is ever what we love, or what we hate  
To th' last Degree ; still in Extremes, their Store  
Or vastly Rich, or scandalously Poor ;  
Whatever Port they make, they still return  
Or of our Wonder Objects, or our Scorn.

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 441.

Thou prosperous Merchant both to *Rome* and *Greece*  
Never return'st, but with a Golden Fleece ;  
Thy *Argo* ne'er a losing Voyage made,  
Equally built for Pleasure, and for Trade.

Bid a new Office be erected, where  
The Tributary Muses shall appear,  
In humble Verse their Customs yearly bring,  
Best Duties, and their grateful Imposts sing ;  
When they the common Subsidies shou'd pay,  
Their Songs submissive at your Feet shall lay.

*Others* in Prose-Epistles we salute,  
You we present with your own Native Fruit,  
But gather'd from a Stock so unlike your own,  
'Twill hardly be by our *Great Master* known :  
For how can any humble Verse of *Mine*,  
Pretend to equal, or resemble Thine ?

In 1722, when printed eulogy of the dead poet was fashionable, these verses were published by Curll and sold for twopence a copy.

Prior was not so enthusiastic about his new post as was Mr. Crispe. "Prior hates his commission of the customs," Swift told Stella, "because he says it spoils his wit. He says he dreams of nothing but cockets, and dockets, and drawbacks, and other jargon words of the custom-house."

The fact was, of course, that he had been spoilt for such dull routine. For the last eighteen months he had been living in more interesting company, and doing more interesting work, than had ever before fallen to his lot. One does not forget that he had represented his sovereign at the diplomatic centre of Europe ; that he had been the trusted agent in negotiations of the greatest importance and secrecy ; and that he had been on equal terms with the social, political and intellectual leaders of twenty years. Nevertheless, his position under Harley's government was more considerable, and more considered,

than it had ever been under the Whigs ; and the men with whom he came into closest contact were of a different order from Dorset and Halifax, and far more congenial. The line of progress which eventually brought him into the company of St. John and Swift proved itself, by arriving at that destination, to be the right line for such a nature as Prior's.

Efforts to demonstrate that Henry St. John was a great statesman—which, in the inevitable reaction against the predominance of the Whig view of history, have been rather frequent of late years—are lamentably ill-supported by solid proofs ; but that he was a brilliant and interesting personality is indisputable. Had not his immoderate desire for his own advancement prevented him from working frankly and harmoniously with others, he might have become the leader of a great party, instead of an intriguer and an exile. For the weapon which he forged in 1710, had he only known how to use it, was a masterpiece.

Finding himself the leading spirit, if not the actual head, of an apparently united ministry, supported by a strong majority in the House of Commons, he was not content, as a duller politician would have been, to rely on those advantages alone. He determined to strengthen his position in two ways which have latterly become far commoner than they were in his time : he would gather the best Tory blood and brains into a club, and found a paper where the keenest Tory pens might scarify the enemy.

Of the nature and functions of the former of these organisations, an excellent description is given in a letter from the founder himself to Lord Orrery:—

“ I must, before I send this letter, give your Lordship an account of a club which I am forming ; and which,



as light as the design may seem to be, I believe will prove of real service. We shall begin to meet in a small number, and that will be composed of some who have wit and learning to recommend them; of others, who from their own situations, or from their relations, have power and influence, and of others, who from accidental reasons may properly be taken in. The first regulation proposed, and that which must be inviolably kept, is decency. None of the extravagance of the Kit-cat, none of the drunkenness of the Beef-steak is to be endured. The improvement of friendship, and the encouragement of letters, are to be the two great ends of our society. A number of valuable people will be kept in the same mind, and others will be made converts to their opinions.

“ Mr. Fenton, and those who, like him, have genius, will have a corporation of patrons to protect and advance them in the world. The folly of our party will be ridiculed and checked; the opposition of another will be better resisted; a multitude of other good uses will follow, which I am sure do not escape you; and I hope in the winter to ballot for the honour of your company amongst us.”<sup>1</sup>

The object of the club, it will be seen, was to consolidate and conserve the Tory spirit by means of social intercourse. Known as the Brothers, its members met informally at one another's houses to dine and discuss the questions of the day. As St. John hoped, the choicest adherents of the party joined it. Prior, who had been expelled from the “extravagant” Kit-cat in 1707, was one of the earliest members. It is to be regretted that he kept no diary of its proceedings.

One matter discussed at this round table was doubtless the press campaign. There was no lack of literary

<sup>1</sup> 12th June, 1711; Bolingbroke, *Works*, vi, 150.

ability among the Brothers. Besides Prior, Swift and Arbuthnot were members; while Harley had at his service a not very clubable, but very effective scribe, Daniel Defoe, who, by the way, had satirised Prior very savagely in his *Reformation of Manners* in 1702. It is no wonder that the paper warfare waged by the Tories at this time was one of the deadliest in the history of pamphleteering.

What part Prior played in it is obscure. Nothing in the nature of a political pamphlet has ever been attributed to him by literary historians. Such ephemera were, it is true, usually published anonymously; but the authorship of the classics in the kind is not in doubt. Had Prior used the weapon, it is hardly likely that all certain evidence of the fact would have disappeared. Yet in his own day he had a reputation inferior only to Swift's. The Duchess of Marlborough was but one of many who credited him with attacks on her husband and the Whigs. Even the famous *Conduct of the Allies* was attributed to him; and a Whig newspaper spoke of him and the author of that pamphlet as "the two Sosias," in allusion to the *Amphitryon* of Plautus or of Dryden.

Such rumours can hardly have been quite without basis. Possibly they are to be referred to his connection with St. John's paper, *The Examiner*; though here again the facts are elusive. That he wrote for the paper is certain; the amount and indentity of his writing is only to be decided by an infallible expert in styles. One number alone is known to be his, the sixth, published on Thursday, 7th September, 1710, and that is of a literary rather than a political character, though, being a destructive criticism of the Whig Dr. Garth's panegyric of the Whig Earl of Godolphin, it scarcely escapes the party taint. It provoked a reply from Addison in

the first number of the short-lived *Whig Examiner*, which is chiefly taken up with dissecting a silly riddle appended to Prior's effusion.

No doubt Matt supplied other material for St. John's paper. On the other hand, his reputation as a writer and a Tory may have led people to exaggerate his share in it. On one occasion, at any rate, he was in danger of being insulted in the streets as the author of an *Examiner* which he had not written.<sup>1</sup> The probability is that he was intimately concerned in the paper's inauguration, but that his journalistic activity ceased, or was greatly diminished, when the accession of Swift had rendered the efforts of lesser writers trivial by comparison.

Swift came to England in September, 1710, and was henceforth the Tory pamphleteer-in-chief. It is to this sojourn in England that we owe the priceless *Journal to Stella* and, incidentally, a number of very interesting references to Prior. The two men of letters seem quickly to have taken to one another. They had much in common. There were depths in Swift's character not to be fathomed by Matt's more frivolous spirit; but *vive la bagatelle!* was a frequent mood of the great satirist, and to that his friend was well able to respond. Moreover, Prior had a keen and cynical eye for character, and, though "very factious in conversation" (according to Macky), he was master of a witty tongue and no small store of learning. He was an inveterate punster; but the pun had not yet fallen into disrepute. "Prior

<sup>1</sup> In the thirty-second number Swift wrote, with apparent reference to Prior: "Mr. — since he is known to visit the present m[inist]ry, and lay some time under a suspicion of writing the *Examiner*, is no longer a man of wit; his very poems have contracted a stupidity many years after they were printed." On 22nd November, 1710, Prior's initials, together with those of Swift and Rowe, were appended to a letter to the *Tatler*, criticising Steele's suggestion that "Great Britain" should be used for "England."

puns very well," says Swift (himself an amateur of the art), and gives more than one instance. "We all pun here sometimes. Lord Carteret set down Prior t'other day in his chariot; and Prior thanked him for his *charity*." "My Lord Treasurer began a health to my Lord Privy Seal: Prior punned, and said it was so *privy*, he knew not who it was." The smile which we bestow on these efforts is hardly one of admiration; but fashions change, and we must not forget that they were once thought worth recording by the greatest genius of his age.

Better things than puns doubtless passed at the gatherings of the Brothers, to whose society Swift was, of course, admitted. Harley's heavy potations rendered him torpid rather than talkative, but St. John would dispose of the universe in facile epigrams, while Swift stripped society naked and Prior re-decked it in motley, and the genial Arbuthnot put in an indulgent word for human frailties. When the talk turned to literature, Matt displayed the author's vanity. "Prior came in after dinner [at St. John's]; and, upon an occasion, he (the Secretary) said, 'The best thing I ever read is not yours, but Dr. Swift's on Vanbrugh; which I do not reckon so very good neither.' But Prior was damped, until I stuffed him with two or three compliments."<sup>1</sup> Like many people who are fond of ridiculing others, the poet was himself extremely sensitive to ridicule. "Mr. Harley made me read a paper of verses of Prior's. I read them plain, without any fine manner; and Prior swore I should never read any of his again; but he would be revenged, and read some of mine as bad. I excused myself, and said I was famous for reading verses the worst in the world; and that everybody

<sup>1</sup> *Journal to Stella*, 11th November, 1710.

snatched them from me when I offered to begin. So we laughed."<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, however, Swift was in a more satisfactory mood. "To-day I dined with Lewis and Prior at an eating-house, but with Lewis's wine. Lewis went away, and Prior and I sat on, where we complimented one another for an hour or two upon our mutual wit and poetry."<sup>2</sup> As spring approached, their colloquies became peripatetic. "The days are now long enough to walk in the Park after dinner," Swift told Stella 21st February, 1711; "and so I do whenever it is fair. This walking is a strange remedy: Mr. Prior walks to make himself fat, and I to bring myself down; he has generally a cough, which he only calls a cold; we often walk round the Park together." The friendship thus begun lasted until Prior's death, and was marked on Swift's side by the generous solicitude of which he was so unexpectedly capable.

Meanwhile the ministers were determined to end the war; and, since the concerted efforts of the Allies had failed, they decided, in direct violation of the terms of the Grand Alliance, to come to an arrangement with France without reference to the Dutch or the Austrians. In April France made certain propositions, and these, it is true, were submitted to Holland; but at the end of May the ministry suddenly broke all communications with the States, and recalled their ambassador from the Hague. In their anxiety for peace—an admirable anxiety founded on motives and pursued by methods which were far from admirable—they were prepared to give Louis much more favourable terms than those Powers, or Marlborough and Godolphin, would offer.

Secrecy, a love of which was one of the few qualities

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 31st December, 1710.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18th November, 1710.

common to Harley and St. John, was, therefore, essential to their proceedings; and they established communications with Torcy, the French minister, by means of one Gaultier, a French priest resident in London, whom Prior introduced to them. Their negotiations with this agent were carried on by the Earl of Jersey, whose wife, a daughter of Charles II's disreputable friend Chiffinch, was a Roman Catholic.<sup>1</sup> Jersey himself was at this time suspected of Jacobitism; and his old secretary Prior, the Whig, the non-party political idealist, the moderate Tory, lay rightly or wrongly under the same stigma.

There is no doubt that, had he lived, the earl would have played a considerable part in the events of the next four years. According to Swift the office of Lord Privy Seal was to have been his, and he would most likely have been sent to France as plenipotentiary so soon as the peace negotiations were fairly afoot. But towards the end of August, 1711, he very suddenly passed from the world. He was mourned by Prior, who had evidently kept up his intimacy with him, in a letter to Sir Thomas Hanmer which recalls the poet's passionate determination to follow the earl's fortunes a dozen years before.

"If you ever knew the tenderness of a true friendship, you will pity my present condition, when I tell you that my dear Lord Jersey went seemingly well to bed on Saturday night, and at five on Sunday morning died—be his spirit for ever happy, and his memory respected. The only moment of ease which I have found since this

<sup>1</sup> A couple of years after Jersey's death, she gave Bolingbroke and Prior much anxiety by her indiscreet conduct. In one of his letters to Bolingbroke, Matt wrote: "The little devil, her husband had once a knife in his hand, to go and kill her; what a puppy was I to hinder him!" [Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 552.] The editor prints a *comma* after "husband," but this seems superfluous. Prior surely referred to the countess, and not to the earl, as a "little devil."

cruel blow is just now while I complain and write to you. Time and necessity I know cure all our sorrows ; but as yet I feel a load upon my spirits which I conceal from the world, and which must be too hard for human nature if it lasts. I know you loved my Lord Jersey, and I hope I trouble you while I give you an account of his death : the Queen, the nation, mankind, has lost a pattern of honour, integrity, and good manners ; you, sir, have lost a man who understood your merit, and courted your friendship ; after you have wept for him, sir, as I beg you to do, I will wish in recompense that those years which he might reasonably have expected, may be added to yours : in the meantime I desire you to believe that till I lie extended on the bier as I saw my poor Lord this morning, I remain most sincerely and inviolably, sir, your obedient and humble servant.”<sup>1</sup>

Before this sad loss of an old friend, Prior had raised himself in the esteem of his latest masters by the successful conduct of a very delicate negotiation. Towards the end of June, after months of subterranean intrigue, the ministers thought the time ripe to enter into more formal, though still private, relations with the French Court, and they chose Matt as their emissary on account of his acquaintance with and popularity in Paris, and also, perhaps, because of his “sincere desire for peace.”<sup>2</sup>

The great concession which he was instructed to offer was that England would acknowledge the right of Louis' grandson Philip to the Spanish throne. *De facto* that prince already reigned in the peninsula, whence the efforts of Peterborough and Stanhope had failed to dislodge him. His claim, of course, founded on the will

<sup>1</sup> *Hanmer Corr.*, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *Torcy's Memoirs* (English trans., 1757), ii, 127.

of Charles II of Spain, was the original *casus belli* ; but the European situation was so different from what it had been in 1701 that the surrender of what had then been a cardinal point was justifiable. The power of France had been so shattered by Marlborough that there was now little to be feared from the union of France and Spain under one family, provided that the crowns themselves were not united. The accession of the Allies' claimant, the Archduke Charles, would indeed have been more dangerous to the balance of power, for in April, 1711, he had succeeded to the hereditary estates of his brother, the Emperor Joseph I, and was himself a strong candidate for the Empire.

What St. John wanted in return for this concession was set forth in a paper of " private propositions " which subsequently fell into the hands of the Secret Committee appointed to investigate these negotiations. Bearing date Saturday, 1st July, 1711, the document provided " that the man was to be sent over to-morrow for a final answer ; that we would make no peace but what should be to the satisfaction of all our allies ; that the Dutch should have a barrier, the Emperor one for their security, and the Duke of Savoy one ; and that he should have restored all that was put into his possession by the Emperor ; and that the French should restore all they had taken from him ; and that he should have what other addition should be thought proper ; and that care should be taken to keep the balance in Italy ; and that we should have positive assurance that the crowns of France and Spain should never be united ; that all our allies should be satisfied according to their agreements and treaties with us ; that the trade of Holland should be secured."

The demands made on behalf of England herself were



more specific. They were "that our trade and commerce should be settled and agreed on such a foot as will be to the satisfaction of the subjects of Great Britain; that the government should be acknowledged in France, as it is now settled in Great Britain; that Gibraltar and Port Mahon should continue in the possession they now are in; that Dunkirk should be demolished; that the *Asiento* [the right of supplying the Spanish colonies with negro slaves] should be entirely in the hands of Great Britain, and that France, nor no other, should pretend to meddle in it, but Britain enjoy it after the peace as the French do now; that Newfoundland should be entirely given up to the English; that the trade of Hudson's Bay should continue in the hands of the French and English, as they are now; and that all things in America should continue in the possession of those they should be found to be in at the conclusion of the peace; that all advantages, or liberty of commerce, that has been or shall be granted to the French by the Spaniards, shall be equally granted to the subjects of Great Britain; that the secret shall be inviolably kept, till allowed to be divulged by the mutual consent of both parties concerned." The last clause, enjoining secrecy, is important. Holland and the Empire were to know nothing of the advantages which England hoped to reap. When, later in the year, it became impossible to keep them altogether in the dark, a discreetly doctored version of St. John's proposals was offered for their consideration.

An air of mystery, therefore, surrounded Prior's journey. In the "private propositions" just quoted he appears simply as "the man." In his passport, the date of which, 3rd July, shows that he did not keep to the letter of the first article of the propositions, he is

described as "Jeremy Matthews."<sup>1</sup> His authority, though signed at the top and initialled at the bottom by the Queen, is neither dated nor countersigned by any minister: omissions which may have been intended to render it difficult to assign the document to any special occasion.<sup>2</sup> He crossed from Dover to Calais in a fishing-boat, accompanied by Gaultier, the French agent. No one except the ministers was sure of the reason of his sudden disappearance from London; not even Swift, who wrote to Stella 24th August: "Prior has been out of town these two months, nobody knows where, and is lately returned. People confidently affirm he has been in France, and I half believe it. It is said he was sent by the Ministry, and for some overtures towards a peace. The Secretary pretends he knows nothing of it." But if Swift was ignorant of the real history of Matt's journey, he was soon to show himself capable of inventing a version of it far more picturesque than the truth.

For a long time, indeed, it appeared that the doctor's brilliant pamphlet (of which more presently) was the only account which would ever be forthcoming of these negotiations. During the proceedings of the Secret Committee the entire absence of any documents relating to the episode, except the "private propositions" and the "authority," was remarked on. The publication of

<sup>1</sup> This passport exists at Longleat. Cf. the song of "Matt's Peace, or the Downfall of Trade":—

"The news from abroad does a secret reveal,  
Which has been confirmed both at Dover and Deal,  
That one Master Matthews, once called plain Mat,  
Has been doing at Paris the Lord knoweth what."

In the *New Journey to Paris*, Prior is made to masquerade as Monsieur Matthews while in the French capital.

<sup>2</sup> The authority was laconic. "Mr. Prior is fully instructed and authorised to communicate to France our preliminary demands, and to bring us back the answer." This limitation of the envoy's functions caused considerable inconvenience and annoyance in France.

Torcy's memoirs threw some light on the subject. But there were far more valuable data to come. Somewhere there existed, in Prior's own handwriting, a detailed *résumé* of the poet's conversations with the French minister and a word-for-word report of his audience with Louis XIV. Presumably Harley possessed this precious manuscript, for it now lies among the Harley papers at Welbeck Abbey.<sup>1</sup> But if he had it, he kept it very close.

The diary opens 12th July, though the interview with Torcy recorded under that date does not seem to have been the first. The minister read Prior three letters from Petkum,<sup>2</sup> desiring the King of France to renew negotiations with Holland, and asserting that the States would offer better terms than England. He also showed him his answer to the second letter, "which was really very great, not to say a little fierce; expressing his master's resentment of the usage he had received from Holland, and his resolution of not entering again into any particular manner of treating with the States." Petkum's third and most urgent letter, after stating the Dutch case, proceeded to inform the French that "the English would deceive them; that the Whigs indeed would act in concert with the Dutch, but that the Tories were privately concerting measures with the Imperialists, and were resolved to continue the war." At this Prior laughed, as well he might; for the Imperialists were, if possible, in deeper dark than the Dutch, and to end the war, at almost any cost, was the one thing on which the Tories were determined. "I show you these letters,"

<sup>1</sup> See *Welbeck MSS.*, v, 34-42. Published in 1899. The only portion not in Prior's hand is the audience dialogue; but there is no reason to suppose it less authentic than the rest.

<sup>2</sup> The resident of Holstein at the Hague. A self-constituted promoter of peace.

said M. de Torcy, "that you may see the plainness and openness with which his Majesty will treat with England, if the propositions you bring leave any possibility for it." He then asked if Prior had not brought any instructions besides the "private propositions," "for that he would be desirous to see something that could possibly be complied with." "I answered," proceeds the journal, "that I hoped he, with a serious air, rallied me, and I, laughing, was serious when I said I had no other memoir, nor the power to recede one iota from any point in this. '*Le paix ne se fera pas donc, Monsieur; tenez, dit il, lisez vous même vos demandes préliminaires.*' I did so, and returning him the paper, I said I had obeyed his orders, and hoped he was going to fill the other side of the paper with such answers as I could carry back. '*Monsieur Prior, dit il, vous avez été dans le commerce, réfléchissez un peu sur ce mémoire*'; so beginning at '*Pour la Great Britain plus particulièrement,*' he said that we asked no less than to be master of the Mediterranean and Spain, to possess ourselves of all the Indies, and to take away from France all that appertains to that Crown in America." Then followed a long discussion, dealing chiefly with the Spanish West Indies, on which point Prior was immovable, and with Newfoundland, as to the English claim whereto he contented himself with historical arguments. The Dutch barrier was their one point of agreement, but they parted with great good humour. "I took this occasion to tell him that at the same time I had a particular favour to beg of him, which was that he would let his Majesty know that, as far as a private person might with manners express himself to so great a prince, I had an entire pleasure in finding his Majesty in so good health. I always retained the greatest veneration for his person, and remembrance

of his favours whilst I was in France, and I hoped his Majesty would contribute whatever he could towards the perfecting that peace which would make him a friend to my Queen and to my country."

At nine in the evening of 14th July, Torcy invited Prior to his lodgings, where, after a little desultory talk about the royal palace and gardens, they settled down to business once more. Since their last meeting the English proposals had been laid before the King, who, like his minister, had considered them impracticable, but had ordered his Council, in conjunction with some picked experts in commerce, to examine and report on them. The result of the deliberations of this body would be known in six or eight days. M. de Torcy hoped the English envoy would not mind remaining in Paris so long. Prior replied that the length of his stay had not been limited; he was, however, anxious to know whether the French Government had full powers to treat on behalf of Spain. On this point, on which he had had special instructions to insist, Torcy was able to reassure him. Their conversation turned once more to America. Prior's account of it is worth quoting as a specimen of his conduct of such discussions. "I said that with all due deference to what he had said *en ministre et pour la France*, I could not but hope that his Majesty and his Council were too *eclaircis* to think that what we demanded from them took anything in reality from France or Spain; that as to the assurance of our commerce in the Mediterranean, we asked no more than what was already assigned us by Monsieur de T[orcy's] letter [the French propositions of 22nd April], for that gave us Gibraltar, and we were now actually possessed of Port Mahon, that as his letter, by '*sureté réelle pour nôtre commerce*,' understood the actual possession of

some places, so the '*sureté réelle pour nôtre commerce aux Indes*' must have the same interpretation, and that we must, consequently, have the actual possession of some places in those parts ; and, said he, do not we know what you are doing ? Have you not put all the money in England upon that chance, and do you not intend to do in the West Indies as you have done in the East, to possess yourselves of the places to fortify them, and to make yourselves masters of the whole trade of the world. I said that, as I had told him before, we most certainly propose to ourselves some advantage in making the peace, in order to recompense us for the prodigious expense we had been at in continuing the war, and that though the present course of trade made us direct our view to the West Indies, yet our designs in that behalf were such as could not give the French, much less the Spanish, occasion to suspect that we should any way become masters in those parts ; that four places in so great a tract of land were so few that the number itself was an answer to the objection, and that, as I had before said, the desire of our possessing these places was rather to defend ourselves in those remote parts of the world against robbers and pirates, than to annoy the Spanish, to whom, in matters of trade, we should rather be a help and assistance. Sir, I added, I see nothing in this demand that concerns France, nor that forbids France obtaining some collateral advantage of the same kind from Spain, but that is no way my affair. France may have other politics and other views. We are a trading nation, and as such must secure our traffic ; her Majesty and her ministry judge it absolutely necessary that this branch of our trade be secured." Torcy, as we know from his memoirs, thought Prior was very sensible of the shocking nature of the proposal (which was apparently implied,

though not precisely stated, in the "private propositions") that England should have four cautionary towns in the West Indies. Matt tried to persuade the French minister that England deserved compensation for the sacrifice she was making in throwing over the Archduke Charles for the benefit of Louis' grandson. Here we seem to recognise the old Prior of the "chicaning answers."

Two days later, Sunday, again at nine o'clock—the Englishman, probably, went abroad little by daylight—Torcy and Prior met in the gardens of Fontainebleau. Their conversation, at which Gaultier was present, was concerned, in the main, with the South Sea Company, on which De Torcy looked as a menace to French trade, while Matt maintained that "it would cause a more equal distribution of traffic" and "make the whole commerce of Europe circulate." In support of his view, Torcy quoted the Dutch gazettes, but Prior scoffed at their authority. "Everybody printed what had been heard in the next coffee-house, and the paragraphs from England were generally supplied by the French refugees at London."

When Prior went to Torcy's lodgings on Wednesday, 19th July, at their usual hour of conference, the minister was able to give him news of the deliberations of the King's Council. It was not very good news, for the more they had studied the English propositions the less they had liked them. The King, however, was most desirous of peace, and although he could not accept certain "terrible articles" in the memorial brought by Prior, he was ready to send to England a plan of his own "as reasonable and extensive as he could," and in the meantime would not listen to Holland's less exigent, though no less urgent, overtures. Prior waited until Torcy had

finished speaking, and then answered with the courteous firmness which the situation seemed to demand. He was sorry, but he did not quite understand what was meant by a plan. The English ministry looked on the memorial, which he, Prior, had had the honour to give to Torcy as a plan, and had ordered him to receive the answer which the French minister should think good to make to the heads contained in it. To this Torcy replied that an answer should be given, but as Prior had no mandate to arrange an accommodation of the points at issue, but only to take an acceptance or rejection of the propositions as they stood, nothing could be done except by sending back to England with him someone charged with full powers to negotiate on behalf of France. Louis and Torcy desired Prior's advice on this matter; for, if there were to be a peace, there was no time to lose. The campaign was drawing to an end; subsidies for another year would be called for; and the whole situation might be changed. Prior, of course, was fain to agree, professed himself sure that an amicable settlement was possible, and promised the French envoy as warm a welcome in London as he had himself received in Paris.

There the matter stood until Friday, when Torcy gave Paris the official answer to the "private propositions" or, more accurately, to those which concerned the Allies in general. The second part, in which the particular demands of Great Britain were set forth, must be discussed by the French representative, M. Mesnager, and the English ministry. Torcy expressed a hope that the commercial question, which was the main obstacle, would be found capable of adjustment. " 'Have you not heard,' said Monsieur de Torcy, 'how the Duke of Marlborough asked *la Terre Neuve au nom de Dieu, faites la grace à la reine ma maitresse de lui*



*rendre la Terre Neuve ; il me semble que vous la demandiez d'une toute autre manière.*' I said," Prior records, " that this way of speaking was, according to the Duke's way, easy and familiar ; that it was true I did not ask it *au nom de Dieu pour la reine ma maitresse, mais au nom de la reine ma maitresse pour la grande Bretagne* ; that the Duke was a great general and unacquainted with the particular ways of treaty ; provided the thing had its desired effect, the manner was sometimes neglected ; that there was some time a small omission in some former treaties, particularly in that we call the Barrier Treaty, where care was taken for the Dutch in matter of commerce upon the tariff 1664, while it was only specified for England '*on tachera de faire un traité de commerce pour l'Angleterre,*' and this, I hope, will be redressed, as it is mentioned in the memoir I had the honour to bring him ; that in what I asked I should always endeavour to preserve the dignity of the crown of Great Britain and preserve the respect due to the minister of France with whom I then spoke."

On 24th July, Prior had his audience with Louis XIV. " Monsieur Torci having the day before delivered to me the answer to the memoir, and M. Mesnager being now appointed and empowered to go with me into England, M. Pecquet came to me in the morning and told me the King would see me at six in the evening in his closet. Accordingly at that time M. Pecquet went privately with me through the lodgings, and Monsieur Torci came out from the King's cabinet and introduced me to his Majesty. The King was walking ; he stood still when I came in, and as I made my obeisance to him he nodded a little, bowed to me at my third bow, and, sitting or leaning his back rather upon a table behind him, as I came up to him he began : '*A ça, Monsieur,*

*Je suis bien aise de vous voir, vous parlez français je sçay.'*

"I: '*Sire, pour pouvoir exprimer la joie que je sens de revoir votre Majesté dans une santé si parfaite, je devais mieux parler français qu' aucun de vos sujets.'*

"He: '*Eh bien, Monsieur, c'est bien honnête, vous savez la reponse que j'ai donné à votre memoire, et vous savez la volonté où je suis de convenir et de traiter avec l'Angleterre. J'y envoie un ministre avec vous, qui s'expliquera en mon nom sur l'affaire ; vous pouvez assurer ceux qui gouvernent l'Angleterre et qui vous envoient que nous ferons tout ce que nous pouvons, moi et le Roi d'Espagne, pour les contenter. Nous voulons la paix l'un et l'autre ; J'y contribuerai de ma part tout ce qui me sera possible.'*

"He having named le Roi d'Espagne, I said—

" '*Sire, la commission dont S.M. la Reine de la Grande Bretagne m'a honoré, le memoire que j'ay donné à Monsieur de Torci et les discours qui je lui ai tenus là dessus sont des preuves convainquantes que l'Angleterre souhaite la paix. J'espère, Sire, que votre ministre est muni d'un pouvoir ample et plein.'*

"He: '*Il est, Monsieur.'*

"I: '*Sire, il trouvera l'Angleterre prête à faire tout pour la paix, qui puisse consister avec l'honneur de [la] nation et la sûreté de leur commerce.'*

"He: '*J'en ferai de même, sur ce fondement la paix se fera, entre deux nations descendues du même sang, et qui ne sont ennemis que par nécessité ; il ne faut pas perdre du temps.'*

"He recommended me again to Monsieur Torci, who stood at a distance while I spoke to the King, and coming up presented M. Gaultier to his Majesty, upon which I took the liberty to say in that gentleman's behalf what really his behaviour merited.

“ ‘ *Sire, voilà un de vos sujets à qui nous devons que la négociation est prévenue jusques ici ; il a pris beaucoup de peine et surmonté beaucoup de difficultés.* ’ ”

“ Taking my leave, I said that I wished his Majesty long life and prosperity, that wherever my duty called me I should always retain a great veneration for his person and acknowledgment of the favours I had received in France.”

\* \* \* \* \*

With as much circumspection as he had come, Prior left Paris, accompanied by Gaultier and Mesnager. They got safely to Calais and safely to Deal, and safely thence, as it seemed, on to the London road. At Deal, however, a zealous customs-house officer—John Macky, the reputed author of the *Characters* on which Swift commented—had conceived a suspicion of the unknown immigrants. He may have recognised Prior and been curious to learn why he was travelling under a false name in the company of two Frenchmen. At any rate, he sent after them and had them arrested at Canterbury, where they were detained until St. John himself ordered their release.

Nothing could have been more unfortunate for the Ministry. News of the affair spread rapidly ; it was pounced on by delighted Whigs ; and rumours of Prior's mission were soon being circulated by the press both of London and of Amsterdam. The satirical ballad of “ Matt's Peace ” went round the town ; the author of which, punning, like Cowley before him, on the name of the author of *Il Principe*, wrote of—

Machiavel P . . . r,

Who richly deserved to be whipt for his pain ;

and prophesied that—

Poor Matt in the pillory soon will be seen.

Nothing of moment leaked out, but it needed very little in those days to make St. John and Harley feel nervous. However, as St. John told Peterborough, it was considered derogatory to the Queen's dignity that her ministers should issue a formal denial.

Then was manifested the advantage of having genius in one's pay. On 31st August, Swift, who knew no more of the true facts of the case than anyone else, wrote to Stella: "I have just thought of a project to bite the town. I have told you that it is now known that Mr. Prior has been lately in France. I will make a printer of my own sit by me one day, and I will dictate to him a formal relation of Prior's journey, with several particulars, all pure invention; and I doubt not but it will take." Accordingly, on 11th September, a twopenny pamphlet, entitled *A New Journey to Paris*, was issued from the shop of Swift's usual publisher, John Morphew.

Sir Walter Scott considered it one of the best things that Swift ever wrote, and it certainly is an admirable fiction. As its author said, it was "a formal, grave lie, from the beginning to the end"; and it was precisely its formality and gravity which gave it an air of truth. It purports to be translated from the French of a certain *Sieur du Baudrier*, who acted, by his own account, as secretary, and, by that of his contemptuous translator, as valet to Prior during his stay in France. It describes Prior's arrival at Boulogne; his interviews there with *Monsieur de Torcy*, masquerading as *Monsieur de la Bastide*; the journey to Paris; and the secret meetings between Prior ("Monsieur Matthews"), Torcy, Madame de Maintenon and Louis XIV himself at Versailles: meetings apparently rendered fruitless by the Englishman's high demands and unyielding tone. The note of imperfect information, supplemented partly by conjecture

and partly by eavesdropping, is very subtly struck, and the detail is perfect for its purpose. Only the last episode, where Prior, on his return journey to Calais, relieves a marquis whom the miseries of war have reduced to begging on the highway, is unworthy of the rest. And this is not Swift's, but was added, much to his annoyance, by some hack employed by the silly printer. The addition does not "spoil all the rest," but it is extravagant and sentimental and utterly out of place.

Swift was very successful in keeping the secret of his authorship. On the day of the pamphlet's publication, he and St. John dined with Prior, whom they found in a state of indignation. "Here is our English liberty!" he exclaimed, and showed Swift the *New Journey*. The doctor, having affected to read some of it, said that he liked it mightily, and envied the rogue his thought; for had it come into his head he would certainly have done it himself. A month later, although under suspicion, he was still unconvicted.

The pamphlet had a great success. A thousand copies were sold on the first day, and 500 more were at once printed. By the end of twelve days, 2,000 had been disposed of. The ministers were delighted; for if the *New Journey* was taken as matter of fact, the impression must certainly get abroad that they were very far from playing into the hands of France as malicious Whigs insinuated. They would seem, on the contrary, to be haughtily dictating terms to an abject monarchy. Harley, who was now Earl of Oxford and Lord Treasurer, would call Prior nothing but Monsieur Baudrier.

## CHAPTER VIII

MATT AND HARRY

FREED from durance at Canterbury, Prior conducted his French friends to Windsor and presented them to the Queen. Then he went to London, and his house in Duke Street, Westminster, became for a time an important, though unofficial, centre of political business. Concerning the meetings held there, the utmost secrecy was observed, and even the first minister of the crown found a back door the most convenient port of entry. Nothing seems to have been put into writing, for the secret committee which inquired into the peace negotiations found no incriminating documents between the "private propositions" of 1st July and St. John's letter to the Queen of 20th September. It is clear, however, that discussion centred in the discrepancies between the English demands which Prior had taken to France and the French answers brought over by Mesnager. On 25th August, according to Torcy, Prior was appointed, in conjunction with the two Secretaries of State, to hear the French proposals. The chief points at issue were the extent of British trading rights in America, the possession of Newfoundland, and the compensation demanded by France for the demolition of Dunkirk.

By 20th September these differences were considered to be sufficiently adjusted for signatures to be set to the preliminaries which should form the basis of a treaty. On that date, Henry St. John wrote a letter to Queen Anne, which, though it has often been printed, cannot be omitted here; for it is one of the most interesting testimonies we have of the high esteem in which Prior

was held by his contemporaries. His reputation did not rest on poetry and diplomacy alone; he was also an acknowledged authority on commerce.

"The Lords of the Committee of Council met this morning at the Cockpit, and directed the Earl of Dartmouth and myself to confer with Monsieur Mesnager. We saw him accordingly this evening at Mr. Prior's house, where my Lord Treasurer and my Lord Chamberlain were likewise present. He has put into our hands the answer signed by the King of France to the demands last sent over by your Majesty's order, and this answer complies with every article, except the eighth, relating to North America [Newfoundland]. We find, however, that we shall be able to compound this point with him in the manner which your Majesty some time ago proposed to pass it in; provided France gave you satisfaction upon the seventh article [commerce in Spanish America], as she has now entirely done.

"The proposals which are to be sent into Holland as the foundation of a general treaty, we have likewise received from him, and that which was thought most liable to objection has been very much mended. My Lord Treasurer having, however, proposed some farther considerations, in order to make the whole the more palatable abroad, and Monsieur Mesnager seeming inclined to agree to them, I am this night to draw them into form for my Lords of the Council to consider to-morrow morning.

"This, Madam, being the present situation of the treaty, your servants were unanimously of opinion that the warrant and the full powers should be prepared this night and transmitted to your Majesty; by which means, if it be your pleasure, the latter may pass the Great Seal to-morrow.

“ It is now so extremely late, I have so much business to do, which must of necessity be got ready by morning, that the whole night would not suffice if I was to engross the instruments in my own handwriting ; I therefore make use of a clerk to transcribe them, but it is the same who has copied all the papers which have passed in the course of this negotiation.

“ There comes an exact translation of the full powers in this packet, the words of which are very ample and extensive ; but they are agreeable to the form used by your Majesty upon such occasions.

“ My Lord Treasurer moved, and all my Lords were of the same opinion, that Mr. Prior should be added to those who are empowered to sign ; the reason for which is, because he having personally treated with Monsieur de Torcy, is the best witness we can produce of the sense in which the general preliminary engagements are entered into. Besides which, as he is the best versed in matters of trade of all your Majesty’s servants who have been trusted in this secret, if you shall think fit to employ him in the future treaty of commerce, it will be of consequence that he has been a party concerned in concluding that convention which must be the rule of this treaty.

“ The rest of the plenipotentiaries are all those who have the honour to sit in your Majesty’s Cabinet Council, which my Lords understood to be your Majesty’s pleasure.

“ The Ostend mail, which arrived last night, brought no news.”

The document forwarded for Anne’s signature, which it duly received, granted full powers to the Lord Keeper, the Lord High Treasurer, the Lord President of Council, the Lord Privy Seal, the Lord Chamberlain, the Lord



Steward and the two Secretaries of State—peers all of them, except the man who was their real leader—and to “our trusty and well-beloved Matthew Prior, esquire,” to sign the preliminaries of peace; but the instrument which put our poet in such high company was never used. A week later it was superseded by another, in accordance with which only the two Secretaries, St. John and Lord Dartmouth, signed the articles. Why the first instrument was ever drawn up is not quite clear. A curious fact about it—upon which the Secret Committee severely animadverted—is that it bears date 17th September, although, upon St. John’s own showing, it was only prepared on the night of the twentieth.

Prior was thus robbed of the opportunity of setting his hand to a diplomatic document of first-rate importance. From St. John’s letter, however, it is evident that he was already thought of for an even more distinguished office. The treaty with France was to be largely a commercial treaty, and Matt, late of the Board of Trade, was considered a suitable plenipotentiary. A few days after the meeting in Duke Street, he had a long interview with St. John, and Swift, getting wind of it, surmised that he would soon be despatched again to France; “and I will put somebody to write an account of his second journey.” Six weeks later the matter was practically settled. But, for the first time in his career, Prior found himself definitely checked by the lowliness of his origin.

The Queen herself, who loved the conventions almost as much as she loved the Church, “thought it very wrong to send people abroad of mean extraction,” but Oxford managed to persuade her of the necessity of employing Prior on this occasion. Stiffer opposition came from another quarter. The principal plenipotentiary

was to be the Earl of Strafford, who, as Lord Raby, had been English ambassador at the Hague, but had been lately summoned to England and raised in the peerage with the title borne for so short a time by his ancestor, Charles I's great minister. Now Strafford, as Swift put it, was as proud as Hell; and the well-meaning congratulations of John Wyche, envoy at Hamburg, must have been very galling:—

“They write me word from the office that your Excellence, my Lord Privy Seal and my old school-fellow and friend, Matt Prior, are designed for the plenipotentiaries to encourage the peace. Faith, my Lord, though the affair is weighty, it could never be put into better hands; experience, resolution and learning won't be wanting, and who can manage the interest of Great Britain better than those who are distinguished by their English hearts.”<sup>1</sup>

All this was pretty, but premature. The earl had no mind to pose as one of a trio of virtuous patriots, and he absolutely refused to be joined on equal terms with a social nonentity. Knowing himself indispensable, for his finger had lately been on the pulse of Europe, he stood firm where the Queen had yielded; and Prior's commission, which is said actually to have been passed, went into the waste-paper basket. Strafford and Privy Seal, who was also Bishop of Bristol, set out for Utrecht without a third colleague; and the poet was given his long-promised commissionership of customs.

Little wonder if he was discontented, growled about cockets and docketts, and viewed the political situation with gloom. In the spring Swift found him ill, melancholy and poor.

His pessimism over public affairs was as well grounded

<sup>1</sup> *Wentworth Papers*, p. 23.

as his private dejection. The proposed groundwork of peace, even in the expurgated form which had been prepared for perusal at the Hague, was viewed with hostility both at home and abroad. Marlborough's arrival in England at the close of his campaign was greeted with enthusiasm. Prior was not the only one who "gave all for gone." Then Swift once more came to the rescue. In *The Conduct of the Allies* he struck a shrewd blow for the peace by arguing that Holland and the Empire had had all the profits of the war, while England paid the bills. Rarely can a pamphlet have been more effective. The credit of the ministry was restored, and the last days of 1711 saw Marlborough dismissed from all his offices and twelve peers created to give the Tories the majority which they needed in the Upper Chamber.

Public affairs, from the ministerial point of view, were thus set on a satisfactory basis. Prior had to wait a few months longer before his personal fortunes revived ; but at the beginning of August, 1712, St. John, now Viscount Bolingbroke, had to go to Paris in connection with the negotiations which were by this time in full swing at Utrecht, and he took Matt with him, with the intention of leaving him there at his own departure. " Je mène avec moi le Sieur Prior," he wrote to Torcy ; " qui se flatte qu'il sera assez heureux de rester auprès de vous." The pleasure was mutual, for " le Sieur Prior " was *persona grata* at the French court " on the score of his wit and humour."

Bolingbroke's stay in Paris was short, but extremely merry. His character as an epicurean rake was well known, and his tastes were duly considered. Business, however, was also transacted ; a general armistice for four months was arranged, and the blackguardly betrayal of the Catalans, who had fought under the British flag,

to the tender mercies of the Bourbon King of Spain was lightly agreed to by the flattered and sated minister.

Bolingbroke returned to England before the end of August, while Prior stayed behind as arranged. At first he found himself in an ambiguous position such as must vividly have reminded him of old days both at the Hague and in Paris itself. As he comprehensively explained to Bolingbroke, he had "neither powers, commission, title, instructions, appointments or secretary." These matters, indeed, were at length set right. Credentials were sent, though tardily, and sent under the care of his secretary, Adrian Drift, the faithful servant of his later days and jealous guardian of his memory. But though they invested him with plenary powers, they did not entitle him to the rank of ambassador. Prior might do the work, but some showier personage must be the Queen's official representative. The Duke of Hamilton was appointed, and when, before ever he had crossed the Channel, he was killed in that famous duel which also proved fatal to his opponent, Lord Mohun, the Duke of Shrewsbury was named his successor. Matt, perhaps, is best described by the style which he appended to his signature in one of his letters to Lord Bolingbroke: "*Animal peregrine missum ad mentiendum R.P. causa.*"<sup>1</sup> As for his duties, Bolingbroke indicated them pretty accurately when he wrote: "For God's sake, dear Matt, hide the nakedness of thy country, and give the best turn thy fertile brain will furnish thee with, to the blunders of thy countrymen, who are not much better politicians than the French are poets."<sup>2</sup> An enormous amount was left to Prior's initiative.

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 90.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

The following letter to the Secretary of State is an example of the difficulties with which he was confronted, and of the clear head and gay spirit with which he met them. It refers to Philip of Spain's renunciation of all right to the crown of France and to the nomination of the Princes of the Blood on whom the succession therefore devolved.

" PRIVATE.

" M[ATT] TO H[ARRY].

" PARIS, *October 17, 1712.*

" I am glad the nomination is assented to, even as I drest it ; I think it is as strong as you wish. *But* I had these additions made by Henchman sent me, with a promise that the next post they should come authentically, in Latin, with the renunciation. *But* three couriers intervened, and they never came. *But* without your last letter, I should not have had grounds to have founded a memorial. *But* in a thing that presses thus, and for which the peace stays, I have no order to send this agreement away immediately to Lord Lexington, though I have taken upon me so to do. *But* if it had not been for your letter, I should not have heard that the French had ever been at Montferrat, except from the Dutch Gazettes. *But* we have been generously promised twelve passports for Spanish ships this month, which, when I tell Monsieur de Torcy, will, without fail, come by Gilligan, I am answered that the ships are already gone without the passports. *But* I have more to write than I can possibly perform, and dare not employ one hand in France ; and can get neither Drift or any other clerk from England. *But* I have not one word kept or entered of anything I do write, or should write. *But* I am forced to make Monsieur Pecquet <sup>1</sup> come to me ;

<sup>1</sup> Apparently Torcy's private secretary.

for example, twice this day, while Monsieur de Torcy stays for him: add to this, the honest stupidity of my English Jonathan, in France, and the complaisance of two French dogs, and one Walloon, in new liveries, that call everybody marquis, and furnish me with a *levée* of spies, projectors, and beggars; that bring Jacobites in to me before I wake in the morning, and put tall Irishmen to bed to me. *Parlons d'autres choses.*

“ The renunciation being now as we desire, I suppose we are to come as soon as we can to our peace. How far, therefore, are we agreed at Utrecht? Are the articles in which we think we are agreed, specified and worded as plainly and distinctly as we desire? For you know as our circumstances stand, the fuller this is done, it is the better; for example, the first article of *pax generalis*, etc.; the second of hostilities ceases; the 3rd or 4th, or sometimes 5th, of securing mutually the property of the subject may be more fully expressed, and have sometimes so been than in the Treaty of Ryswick, which followed jejune that of Breda; and you know tautology is no ill figure to the *many*. If any article remains yet not supervised and agreed, as that particularly of the *droit d'aubaine* taken off, should not such articles be all ready drawn up, in order to their being consented to? And even that article which will specially refer to the renunciation to be made, which will be the basis of the treaty?

“ The article which will say France shall never assist the Queen's enemies, etc., should stay in the very words as mentioned in the 4th of Ryswick; it looks at least more authentic, standing thus confirmed in two treaties, and I believe cannot be stronger; there are other reasons, too, for it. I wish, therefore, that a copy of the treaty were sent hither, as it is designed,

with an account of every article, as agreed, or to which anything is to be added.

"As likewise of a treaty of commerce, what already agreed, what asked, what to be adjusted, and by whom. In this case, my dear master, we should have our work before us.

"As to the treaty itself, since the signing it is to be a sort of a secret, what harm if it be signed at London? Is it not as honourable to the Queen, that d'Aumont comes to her Court to sign a peace, as Mesnager did to own her authority; and as you signed a cessation at Paris, is it not as handsome that you confirm it by signing a peace at Whitehall? This, I say, I have been hammering, and will hint or prevent as you shall think proper. I need not protest that it is with true friendship that I shall in this or anything endeavour what may be for your honour and satisfaction. Your most truly,

"M. PRIOR.

"Consult my Lord Treasurer upon the contents of my letter, and let me found myself upon your answer. Madame de Torcy is glad that you are so good; la Feriole<sup>1</sup> thanks you, but nobody must ever do one single kindness for a woman, and you must back your recommendation and I must write, and this brother (not worth hanging, I fancy, after all) must be established in his *abbaye de l'Abondance*. The Duke of Argyll is arrived this evening at Paris; I have ordered everything for his reception, but since I must despatch the courier to-night, and have an audience to-morrow morning, I cannot see him till towards noon."<sup>2</sup>

The negotiations at Utrecht were making but slow

<sup>1</sup> Madame de Feriole was supposed to have been Bolingbroke's mistress. Her brother (eventually a cardinal) was at this time made Abbot of Abondance, in Geneva.

<sup>2</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 85.

progress. Fresh difficulties were for ever presenting themselves for adjustment, matters which had to be referred to Versailles and Whitehall. It was in no small measure due to Prior's efforts that the dreaded deadlock was prevented. At one point Bolingbroke thought of sending him to the Dutch town, in spite of the haughty Lord Strafford, to assist in settling the commercial clauses of the treaty. He seems soon, however, to have abandoned the idea.

The diplomatic details which fill the letters of Bolingbroke, Torcy and Prior are bewildering. "I own to you, I do not know what all this means," Matt himself wrote on one occasion. In face of such an admission from a protagonist, we may be pardoned, if not commended, for turning from these technicalities to those parts of the correspondence which are "only from Harry to Matt, and not from the secretary to the minister."

For it was not only Christian names, but Christian names familiarly shortened, between these two, except when the official character of their letters called for greater ceremony. In many respects they were kindred spirits. Perhaps they talked over that higher Toryism which Prior had adumbrated in his letters to Portland, and Bolingbroke was to embody in his famous essay. Certainly they were brothers in wit, in cynicism and in love of letters. Their levity in the intervals of business was subsequently censured by their enemies. They worked together perfectly; for they could understand, but could not shock one another. Prior was one of the few who remained on friendly terms with both Oxford and Bolingbroke. Swift (who was another) thought that he might have healed the breach which, latent from the beginning, came to a crisis in 1714. "Mr. Prior, who



was much loved and esteemed by them both, as he well deserved, upon the account of every virtue that can qualify a man for private conversation, might have been the properest person for such a work, if he could have thought it to consist with the prudence of a courtier ; but, however, he was absent in France at those junctures when it was chiefly necessary.”<sup>1</sup> Swift himself tried to reconcile the two ministers, and failed. Prior, perhaps, had more tact for such a task ; yet it is doubtful whether he would have succeeded. Bolingbroke and Oxford were hopelessly incompatible ; nor was the Secretary of State to be satisfied with anything less than supplanting the Lord Treasurer.

No longer under the restraint which had been necessary during his visit of the previous year, Prior made good use of his leisure. He supped frequently with Torcy, who was never tired of expressing his delight in his company, and taught Madame to drink *à Harré et à Robin* ; in other words, to Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke, and Robert Harley, Earl of Oxford. He was made free of the former's very numerous Parisian acquaintances, among whom were many charming ladies, such as the beautiful Comtesse de la Parabère. In such company he must have made himself very popular, if he was always as happily inspired as when—everyone in turn having to sing a little song with the refrain “*Bannissons la melancholie*,” and his immediate predecessor having been a pretty girl—he produced, instead of the prescribed lines, this extemporary quatrain :—

Mais cette voix, et ces beaux yeux,  
Font Cupidon trop dangereux,  
Et je suis triste quand je crie  
Bannissons la Melancholie.

<sup>1</sup> *An Enquiry into the Behaviour of the Queen's last Ministry.*

Like Bolingbroke, he frequented the opera ; in reference to which there is another anecdote. He was sitting next to one of those deplorable persons who cannot refrain from adding their own voices to that of the singer. Presently Prior began to rail with great vehemence against the performer, until his neighbour, in astonishment, ceased his private warbling and began to expostulate. The singer, he pointed out, was one of the most distinguished on the French stage. " I know that," answered Prior, " but he sings so loud that I cannot hear *you*." On another occasion, to an attendant who wanted to sell him a book of the words, he replied : " No, child, I come to hear what they sing, but not to mind what they say." <sup>1</sup> This repartee he thought worth recording in one of his note-books, as he did another connected with the theatre which he made to a more exalted personage than a programme-seller. The Duc d'Aumont told Louis XIV that in England they " blooded the theatre too much, and that he had seen the heads brought in in *Titus Andronicus*." " Is this accusation true, Monsieur Prior ? " the King asked. " We did it so upon an extraordinary occasion," replied the plenipotentiary, " to divert the Duke of Aumont by the strangeness of the spectacle because he did not understand the beauty of the words." <sup>2</sup> Louis XIV had always liked Prior, and was amused by his ready tongue. Monsieur de Livré had told him that Matt was fond of a certain old Burgundy which the King was himself in the habit of drinking. " Monsieur Prior," said his Majesty, " vous aimez à ce que me dit Livré ce vieux vin. Je croy qu'il n'y a en France que vous et moy qui en bevons : vous me flattez agreablement." " Point

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxi, f. 137 d.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 139.

de tout, Sire, car votre Majesté prend la liberté de le boire avec de l'eau, mais Monsieur de Livré me contraint de l'avaler tout pur."<sup>1</sup> When Louis asked him point-blank how he liked the Dauphin, Prior said that he made him melancholy every time he saw him. "Why so?" "Sir, reflecting that the Queen of England has not just such another."<sup>2</sup> But when a Frenchman commended the Dauphin's wit, Prior shrewdly rejoined that he would not have had so much wit if his brother had not died.<sup>3</sup> One of the neatest of the replies which he had the complacency to preserve was that to Baron Alsfeldt, who asked if England could boast a finer lady than Mademoiselle Charolais. "Monsieur," said Matt, "on ne peut pas répondre à cette question: les anges n'ont point de pays natal."<sup>4</sup>

Towards the end of October, Louis sent Prior into England, mainly to urge the Elector of Bavaria's claim to the Spanish Netherlands. He was accompanied by a letter from King to Queen, in which the envoy is referred to in very complimentary terms. The allusions in the letters which passed between Torcy and Bolingbroke are less respectful:—

"Quoique Matthieu soit l'homme du monde le plus insupportable," wrote the French minister to the English; "je crois, my Lord, qu'il a encore assez de probité pour travailler de bonne foi et tout de son mieux à finir notre ouvrage; nous sommes donc convenus qu'il partirait pour aller vous trouver, et pour vous assurer, mieux que je ne puis faire moi-même, du desir sincère et véritable qu'on a ici de conclure et avec vous et avec des alliés à qui vous donnez une protection qu'ils n'ont guères

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 133 d.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

méritée ; mais c'est vous que l'on considère, et l'état de vos affaires.

" Finissez donc, my Lord, comme il dépend de vous de le faire, et renvoyez au plutôt Matthieu, afin que j'aie le plaisir de le faire pendre, comme il s'y est engagé, si la paix n'est pas conclue moyennant la cession de Tournay.

" S'il est de bonne foi, il vous dira ce que je souffre en mon particulier de ce changement ; les infidelles triomphent et je reçois des reproches que d'autres services n'effaceront jamais. Mais je souffre pour vous, et si la paix se fait comme j'espère, je serai content quand même Matthieu ne seroit pas pendu." <sup>1</sup>

Torcy reverts to the subject of hanging in another letter ; and 11th November, when Matthew had been in England about a fortnight, and was supposed to be on the point of returning, Bolingbroke wrote : " Je crois que vous le trouverez instruit à finir toutes choses, et que malgré sa phisionomie, qui n'est pas des plus heureuses, il ne sera pas pendu pour le coup." The handsome Bolingbroke had the smallest opinion of Prior's physical charms : " ce visage de bois," he called him.

Although his return to Paris was considered urgent, Matt was delayed by the death of the Duke of Hamilton, which happened while he was in England ; and he did not actually leave London until 1st December. Torcy was impatiently awaiting him. " Pour moi, Monsieur," he wrote to Bolingbroke, " je trouverai autant de charmes au visage de bois qu' à Madame de Parabère, quand j'apprendrai par lui de vos nouvelles. Je n'aurois peut-être pas osé me servir de cette honorable epithète, si je ne le croyois présentement en deçà de la mer, et par

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 101.

conséquent hors d'état de ma lettre. Je ne voudrais pas qu'il eut aucune reproche à me faire à son arrivée, car il trouveroit le moyen de s'en venger." It is, perhaps, worth while to notice, in passing, that the immediate future of Europe lay largely at this time in the hands of three lovers of raillery. The laughing philosophers who managed affairs at Whitehall and represented Queen Anne in Paris were on such terms with the chief minister of their country's enemy as strongly contrasted with the suspicion and duplicity to which they treated her ratified allies. No wonder if Matt was considered a pensioner of France.

"He is for doing all alone, and wearies every one who has business with him by delays and ambiguous answers," was another complaint against him. Both charges were unjust. The enormous letters which he wrote to the Secretary of State directly after his return to Paris show with what energy and in how businesslike a manner he was endeavouring to clear away the difficulties which still stood between the Treaty of Utrecht and the signatories' pens. And as for his being in the pay of France, he may have shown scant consideration for Dutch or Imperial interests, but he was keen to drive as good a bargain as possible for his own country. Torcy pays somewhat rueful tribute to diplomatic talents which were exercised at his own expense.

"Vous nous avez renvoyé, my Lord, sous l'extérieur de Matthieu, le véritable fils de Monsieur Buys <sup>1</sup>; il ne lui manque que de remplir la verre de son père. Il est d'ailleurs aussi Hollandois, et je crois beaucoup plus opiniâtre. Il a fallu céder et se conformer presque à tout ce qu'il a voulu; encore n'étoit-il pas content; j'espère cependant que vous le serez, et que toutes les

<sup>1</sup> Dutch ambassador at Paris.

difficultés qui arrêtent encore la signature du traité vont être levées ; mais je vous avoue, que je m'attends à des reproches terrible de la part des Plénipotentiaires du Roi, qui disputoient fortement avec les vôtres sur des articles que Matthieu a obtenus sans beaucoup de peine, et peut-être avec moins de raison. Enfin je crois que vous serez plus content de son Excellence que je ne le suis, et j'espère que Monsieur le Duc de Shrewsbury, que j'attends à tout moment, trouvera que les choses ont été bien avancées. Je ne doute pas aussi qu'on ne les avance du côté d'Utrecht, et que vos alliés ne se mettent à la raison." <sup>1</sup>

Even after the arrival of Shrewsbury, the new ambassador, who was a spectacular rather than a working statesman, Prior continued his strenuous endeavours. So exclusively businesslike grew his letters, that Bolingbroke became anxious. "If I have the honour of a line from you," he wrote to Sir Thomas Hanmer, who was in Paris, "pray give me some account of Matt's private life. Once I was in the gentleman's secret ; but his last despatch contains, in almost a ream of paper, nothing but solemn accounts of business, such as made me expect to find Jo. Werden, instead of Mat. Prior at the bottom of the voluminous epistle. We hear much of a certain eloped nun, who has supplanted the nut-brown maid. . . ."

As the negotiations drew towards a close, Prior, nervous as ever where etiquette was concerned, wanted to know whether he was to stay in Paris for Shrewsbury's public entry as ambassador, and, if so, in what character he was to appear on that occasion. He wrote both to Oxford and to Bolingbroke on the subject, protesting, sincerely enough, that he was not ambitious for aggrandizement, but only wished to be assigned a definite and

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 167.

dignified position. Shrewsbury also, the good-natured "King of Hearts," who had been Matt's friend nearly twenty years ago, put in a word for him. "Mr. Prior has been to the last degree useful to me," he told Bolingbroke, "and serviceable to her Majesty in all this negotiation: I wish you would write and encourage him. When I make my entry, it will look strange if he have not some sort of handsome equipage to appear at the same time; as he lives, he spends a great deal of money, and yet makes no show, for want of a fund to buy something at first that is creditable; pray put Lord Treasurer in mind of him."<sup>1</sup> But the Lord Treasurer was a procrastinator; and it was from Lord Dartmouth, the other Secretary of State (to whose department, had Bolingbroke been a normal colleague, Prior's affairs should have belonged), that the envoy at last received definite information. The Queen thought fit that he should appear at the entry as a private gentleman; the commission of plenipotentiary did not give a representing character. Between the lines one reads the excellent Anne's dislike of honouring "mean extraction."

Prior was vexed by this niggardly acknowledgment of his services. "Do me justice, my dear Lord," he cried to "Harry"; "did I ever desire to be a lion in Arabia, any more than to be an ambassador at Paris?—And could it be supposed that I should think I had a representative character, by my asking for a coach? As to a private gentleman, are there not of these animals of all sorts, from those who have six Flanders horses, to others who drive in a *vinegrette*? But I believe you have concerted this matter already with Lord Treasurer, and will trouble you no more on this subject, than to set me right in her Majesty's opinion as to what I have

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 291.

asked, and to let you understand the validity of the answer."<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke used his influence; and when on 11th June, after some delays, the entry took place, Prior, as her Majesty's plenipotentiary, rode in a coach drawn by six horses, which was preceded only by those of the ambassador himself and the Princes of the Blood.<sup>2</sup>

The treaty, in so far as it concerned English and French relations, had been signed at the beginning of April; and Prior, as always when he saw the end of one job in sight, began to look out for another. He was uncertain whether he was to leave Paris, but anticipated the reunion of the Brothers in the near future. "In the meantime, pray give my great respects to our brethren," he wrote to Swift, "and tell them that, while in hopes of being favoured, they are spending their own money, I am advancing my interests in the French language, and forgetting my own mother tongue. But we shall have time enough to perfect our English when we have done

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 325. To Oxford he wrote: "... Lord Dartmouth in the mean time writes me word that amongst all those who pretend to be skilled in matters of ceremony, the commission of plenipotentiary does not give a representing character. My Lord, I am, and always was, very far from thinking it does, or ought to do; nor no greater mischief can, I think, happen to me than that her Majesty should believe I did not know this great distinction, or ever had it in my mind to ask to be ambassador. So far otherwise that the name of her Majesty's plenipotentiary is far above my deserts, and that I never ambitioned but as it was necessary to my executing her great commands. But I repeat to your Lordship that your orders as to my expense may be sudden in case they are not given. And if I am to stay here till the entry, though I appear as a private gentleman, it must still be like such a sort of gentleman as bears the figure of her Majesty's servant, and also has had the honour of imparting her commands to this Court. Your Lordship will make the use of this little word to my advantage in her Majesty's opinion of me. Let the coach and equipage go as they may, I am ever with perfect obedience to your commands, my Lord, etc."

<sup>2</sup> At Shrewsbury's first public audience a quarrel arose in the courtyard at Versailles between his suite and the household servants. "M. Prior, qui étoit avec l'ambassadeur, fut obligé de descendre et eut bien de la peine à mettre les holà." [Dangeau, *Journal*, xiv, 421.]



with other matters.”<sup>1</sup> He just missed being sent on a brief and unburdensome mission which would have constituted a pleasant holiday after the intrigues of the last months. By the terms of the treaty the Duke of Savoy was created King of Sicily; and Shrewsbury suggested that Matt should be sent to Turin with the Queen’s congratulations to the new sovereign. The suggestion, it goes without saying, was kindly considered by Bolingbroke; but in the end, presumably for social reasons, the commission was given to the Earl of Peterborough.<sup>2</sup>

The Duke of Shrewsbury, who was to leave Paris as soon as he had paid his visits of ceremony, took great pains to get his friend’s future settled. Early in July he wrote to Lord Oxford—

“If your Lordship intends Mr. Prior should stay here any time as her Majesty’s minister, it is fit he should know it, and have money advanced to put himself in an equipage becoming his character. He lives now in hired lodgings dearer than a house, and not decent if he remains, but in the uncertainty he is left he can do no otherwise.”<sup>3</sup>

But the Lord Treasurer’s tardiness was notorious. It irritated the impulsive Bolingbroke beyond endurance. Three weeks later the ambassador sent him another reminder.

“My stay here being short, and nobody named to relieve me, I imagine Mr. Prior is designed to be left, in which case I cannot forbear putting your Lordship in

<sup>1</sup> Swift, *Correspondence* (ed. Ball), ii, 18.

<sup>2</sup> Prior several times passed criticism on the mercurial Mordanto; most pointedly, perhaps, when he said that “Peterborough’s ideas are like those of painters in fresco, bigger than the life. If you see them at a certain distance, some of them are pretty enough; but if you look at them near, they are confused.” [Prior Papers (Longleat), xxi, f. 138 d.]

<sup>3</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, i, 235.

mind again that he ought to be upon some fixed establishment, and not upon the uncertainty he now is, which is expensive and not creditable for her Majesty. The handsome rewards the abbé,<sup>1</sup> who will deliver you this, has received from the Courts of France and Spain for his pains in the peace, makes Prior, I believe, hope he shall not be forgotten.”<sup>2</sup>

As subsequently transpired, Prior's finances, whether owing to his own extravagance or to the irregular nature of his appointment, which put him at a disadvantage with a grudging Treasury, had become acutely involved.

Matt professed himself “infinitely beholding-” to Shrewsbury, and ready to follow him “*per freta per scopulos*.” But his gratitude was rather for the duke's good intentions than for what he had been able to effect. When Shrewsbury drove out of Paris on the last day of August, he left Prior behind him; but no new ambassador had been appointed, nor had Matt's position been defined. He was no longer plenipotentiary, for the treaty which he had been given powers to negotiate was accomplished; he was not ambassador; he was not even entitled, as he had been on earlier occasions, to call himself secretary. He did not know whether he was to stay in the French capital or to be instantly recalled. His situation was both uncomfortable and undignified. Many changes were being made in the Government, yet no office was assigned him. There were both pathos and justice in his protest to Bolingbroke. “I found myself a good deal mortified in the changes that have been lately made, particularly in the 'Chequer, without one word of your friend Matt; and more because a good deal has been writ in England, printed from

<sup>1</sup> Presumably Gaultier.

<sup>2</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, i, 237.

Holland, and talked at this Court upon that subject. As to my own private affairs, considered as such, pass ; I have (may be) more than I deserve, though I have worked very hard here, and done my best ; but as those affairs relate to the service, I think it better that I should be recalled before these people find I am neglected at home. This I write to my dear Lord Bolingbroke, and I believe he will find the Duke of Shrewsbury in the same sentiment.”<sup>1</sup>

As a matter of fact, the ministers seem to have been unable to decide what to do with him. They repeatedly talked of recalling him, but never did so. Various employments floated in and out of the bounds of possibility or even probability. The appointment of a successor to Shrewsbury was threatened and deferred. In September Prior heard that the Lord Treasurer had “something *in petto*” for him, and had even named it, though not to the man most concerned. At the same time he was informed that General Charles Ross had been appointed envoy extraordinary, and was to be in Paris until an ambassador was chosen.

“You may be sure, my dear Lord,” Prior told Bolingbroke, “that I am very glad to come home to you, and to find some settlement, which I do not doubt of, from Lord Treasurer’s goodness to me : if (whatever it is) it were done, or at least so far done as to be talked of here, before I left this Court, it would have a better air, and give me more credit in despatching the business I have yet to do ; you know these people, and the account they will make of Matthew, as they think he has credit with Henry and Robin ; but this is all with a perfect submission.

“Adieu, my dear Lord ; if at my return I may help

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 488.

you any way in your drudgery, the youngest clerk you have is not more at your command ; and if at the old hour of midnight, after your drudgery, a cold blade-bone of mutton, in Duke Street, will go down *sicut olim*, it, with all that belongs to the master of the house (except Nanny), is entirely yours." <sup>1</sup>

Yet things were precisely in the same position in the following April, when Bolingbroke wrote to Oxford suggesting that Prior should be sent as minister to Baden. Oxford's endorsement of this letter—"He has opposed me about a minister for Baden since the Peace of Rastadt was known to be concluded, and that I proposed one" <sup>2</sup>—shows in what sort of spirit it was received. The next day, Bolingbroke told the Treasurer that he would prepare to recall Prior and to send Ross. Rumours of these fruitless propositions and unfulfilled intentions came to Prior, who, once more, 1st May, 1714, launched a protest against the treatment he was receiving.

"MY DEAR LORD AND FRIEND,—Matthew had never so great occasion to write a word to Henry as now ; it is

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 522. The invitation recalls that which Prior wrote in verse to Lord Oxford in 1712:—

Our weekly friends to-morrow meet  
At Matthew's palace, in Duke Street,  
To try for once, if they can dine  
On bacon-ham and mutton-chine.  
If wearied with the great affairs,  
Which Britain trusts to Harley's cares,  
Thou, humble statesman, may'st descend  
Thy mind one moment to unbend,  
To see thy servant from his soul  
Crown with thy health the sprightly bowl :  
Among the guests, which e'er my house  
Received, it never can produce  
Of honour a more glorious proof—  
Though Dorset used to bless the roof.

<sup>2</sup> *Welbeck MSS.*, v, 423.

noised here that I am soon to return. The question that I wish I could answer to the many that ask, and to our friend Colbert de Torcy (to whom I made your compliments in the manner you commanded) is, what is done for me, and to what I am recalled? It may look like a bagatelle, what is to become of a philosopher like me; but it is not such, what is to become of a person who had the honour to be chosen and sent hither as entrusted, in the midst of a war, with what the Queen designed should make the peace; returning with the Lord Bolingbroke, one of the greatest men in England, and one of the finest heads in Europe (as they say here, if true or not, *n'importe*) having been left by him in the greatest character (that of her Majesty's plenipotentiary) exercising that power conjointly with the Duke of Shrewsbury, and solely after his departure; having here received more distinguished honour than any minister, except an ambassador, ever did, and some which were never given to any but who had that character, having had all the success that could be expected, having (God be thanked!) spared no pains; at a time when at home the peace is voted safe and honourable; at a time when the Earl of Oxford is Lord Treasurer, and Lord Bolingbroke first Secretary of State, this unfortunate person, I say, neglected, forgot, unnamed to anything that may speak the Queen satisfied with his services or his friends concerned as to his fortune.

"Monsieur de Torcy put me quite out of countenance the other day by a pity that wounded me deeper than ever did the cruelty of the late Lord Godolphin; he said he would write to Robin and Harry about me: God forbid, my Lord, that I should need any foreign intercession, or owe the least to any Frenchman living, besides decency of behaviour and the returns of common

civility. Some say I am to go to Baden, others that I am to be added to the commissioners for settling the commerce; in all cases I am ready, but in the meantime, *dic aliquid de tribus capellis*: neither of these two are, I presume, honours or rewards, neither of them (let me say to my dear Lord Bolingbroke, and let him not be angry with me) are what Drift may aspire to, and what Mr. Whitworth, who was his fellow-clerk, has or may possess. I am far from desiring to lessen the great merit of the gentleman I named, for I heartily esteem and love him: but in this trade of ours, my Lord, in which you are the general, as in that of the soldiery, there is a certain right acquired by time and long service. You would do anything for your Queen's service, but you would not be contented to descend, and be degraded to a charge no way proportioned to that of Secretary of State, any more than Mr. Ross, though he would charge a party with a halberd in his hand, would be content all his life after to be a serjeant. Was my Lord Dartmouth from Secretary returned again to be commissioner of trade; or from Secretary of War, would Frank Gwin think himself kindly used to be returned again to be commissioner? In short, my Lord, you have put me above myself, and if I am to return to myself, I shall return to something very discontented and uneasy; I am sure, my Lord, you will make the best use you can of this hint for my good. If I am to have anything, it will certainly be for her Majesty's service, and the credit of my friends in the ministry, that it be done before I am recalled from hence, lest the world may think either that I have merited to be disgraced, or that ye dare not stand by me; if nothing is to be done, *fiat voluntas Dei*.

"I have writ to Lord Treasurer upon this subject, and, having implored your kind intercession, I promise you

it is the last remonstrance of this kind that I will ever make. Adieu, my Lord, all honour, health and pleasure to you." <sup>1</sup>

After all, Prior stayed in Paris for nearly another year ; and it was not to receive rewards from a grateful and friendly ministry, but to suffer disgrace and imprisonment, that he was at length recalled.

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 654.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE DOWNFALL

MEANWHILE, he was far from idle. Soon after the conclusion of the peace, indeed, he fell ill. At an earlier stage of his sojourn in Paris he had suffered from what he called *cholera morbus* and *une toussé galante dans toutes les formes*, but these ailments were soon cured. In April, 1713, his case was more serious; he was suddenly taken ill at Versailles and an imposthume broke in his lung, with symptoms which need not be enumerated. Fortunately, however, a skilful physician was at hand; and after a week Matt could tell Bolingbroke that he was better than he had been for seven years and might yet live to be a devouter man. A month later he was still weak, but able to write a long business letter, which ends on the true note of a convalescent's gaiety: "Your huntress will be caught, if you have breath enough to follow her, and so will every huntress, from Atalanta and Diana to Cloe and Nannette; it is only want of lungs that will distance you in the chase, so go tay-ho, tay-ho! and when you cough like me, hang up your hunting spear and shrill horn, and sit like me too to write politic letters and to think of nothing else but performing the bare duties and obligations of life."

Like most men with whom ill-health is chronic, Matt did not let it stand for long in the way of business. There was still plenty to do. The Assiento contract with Spain, for instance, was not signed until after the main treaty; while Bolingbroke was working hard to establish a free trade between England and France.



But St. John's schemes, after the Treaty of Utrecht, were doomed to failure. The Tory party was shattered by dissension, and the Whigs were daily gaining ground. How gloomy the prospect seemed to him appears from a letter which he wrote to Prior, 4th July, 1713.

"You are very just to an honest heart; when you depend upon my friendship, it shall never fail you: God knows whether it will at any time be useful to you.

"Believe me, dear Matt, I have not been unmindful of you, nor cool in my solicitations to have your station appointed; my Lord Treasurer is at present confined by illness; as soon as he returns to Court, I attack him afresh.

"I am unfortunate in all my negotiations, at least in all those at home.

"At the last election at Westminster, I endeavoured to have sent a very pretty lad, who wears your name, and therefore was entitled to my best services, to Christ Church; but Bentley *pro solita humanitate sua*, leaped over eight boys to make this youth his first option, and remained, with all the good breeding of a pedant, inflexible.

"I make no doubt but you are surprised at the wisdom of our senate in suspending the passing of the bill to make effectual the eighth and ninth articles of the treaty of commerce. Lord Anglesey and Sir T. Hanmer are at the head of this worthy project.

"The treaties met with the coldest reception, when they were laid before the Houses; and those who were frightened out of their senses lest they should not be made, affected to appear very indifferent to them when they were made.

"Judge whether the Whigs were blind to this advantage, or slow to disperse lies, to raise prejudices, to work

up a momentary ferment ; their lies, these prejudices, this ferment, were urged as reasons for doing nothing this session in the business of commerce.

" Adieu, *quos perdere vult Jupiter prius dementat*. God keep you and I [*sic*] in our wits. Love me as I love you." <sup>1</sup>

The reference to Prior's young namesake is interesting. He was presumably the Robert Prior, son of William Prior of Hitchin, Hertfordshire, who was admitted to Trinity College, Cambridge, as pensioner on Westminster election, 4th June, 1713. It cannot be doubted that he was related to Matt: perhaps as nephew, but more probably as first cousin once removed. "I am obliged to you very particularly," wrote the poet to Bolingbroke, "for your care of my friend Prior; I cannot imagine how you came to know that snudging boy, for his mother is very homely. Bentley will always be an ill-bred pedant; can the leopard change his skin? I hope you may never have anything more essential to trouble you than the disappointment of the boy's going to Trinity. I think I shall always have interest in Cambridge to make his stay there easy; and if he has the continuance of your patronage, I think, too, matters cannot go so ill but that in four years we may set him afloat in the world." <sup>2</sup> Four years later, as it happened, neither Bolingbroke nor Prior was in a position to dispense patronage; and we hear no more of their *protégé*.

The great cause of disunion among the Tories was the question of the succession. Anne's health was failing. Was George or James to occupy the throne at her death? There were out-and-out Jacobites in the party. On the other hand, there was the group led by Sir Thomas Hanmer, which was determined to uphold the Act of

<sup>1</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 436.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 445.

Settlement. Between these lay the main body of the party, which was ready to support the Pretender, but only on the condition that he should change his religion. Anne herself was of this way of thinking. So also were both Oxford and Bolingbroke; but while the Treasurer insisted on the condition, the Secretary, when he realised that it would never be accepted by James, was ready to waive it. As a matter of fact, it took both Oxford and Bolingbroke a long time to understand that a man could be ready to sacrifice a crown to his religious convictions; and the consequence of their incredulity was a protracted course of fruitless negotiation, in which the English minister at Paris was largely concerned.

Prior's own views on the subject seem rather to have been those of Oxford than of Bolingbroke. The Duke of Berwick, writing to the Pretender (his half-brother) from St. Germain, says: "I had a long discourse with Mr. Pecour, but he insisted so much upon M. Robinson's making up with M. Pery, that I could bring him to no conclusion favourable for this present time."<sup>1</sup> Mr. Pecour was Prior's pseudonym in the Jacobite cypher; M. Robinson was James; and M. Pery, apparently, the Church of England. Now, this letter is dated 6th January, 1715, some months after Anne's death, when Prior was no longer the mouthpiece of a government, but a private gentleman in a very uncomfortable position. It was just the moment when, if he had had any inclination that way, he would have shown himself amenable to Berwick's arguments. Like everyone connected with the Oxford ministry, he had been freely accused of Jacobitism; but it is clear that he was no more enthusiastic for the Stuarts than the majority of the Tories.

<sup>1</sup> *Stuart Papers*, i, 342.

While the Tory ministry stood, of course, his relations with the Pretender were dictated from England. The question of Mary of Modena's jointure had come up once more ; and Prior had at least one interview with the ex-queen. With Berwick, who was in close communication with Torcy, he probably had many.

But whatever his activities, he must have had far more time for amusement than before the peace. With ten horses in his stable and knaves in proportion, he cut a creditable figure. He entertained and was entertained by the brilliant circle into which Bolingbroke and Torcy had introduced him. Of one of his dinner-parties he names the guests : Mesdames Croissy, Torcy and Bouzolles, and Lady Jersey ; Cardinal Polignac, Abbé Pompone, Count Croissy " and that gang " ; " Albergotti to sing, *accompagnement de musique*, and everything *à l'honneur de l'Angleterre*." Among such company the man who had once drawn wine in a tavern was as gay and polite as any ; and that, too, although he was tortured by anxiety. For the Queen was ill, and this was the letter he wrote to Bolingbroke the day after the feast :—

" The very apprehensions I felt from what you said of the Queen's being ill, though you added the news of her being recovered, gave my carcase a very ugly shock ; so much do my own fears naturally outweigh my joys, or plainer, so much am I rather a coward than a hero. Good God ! what a thousand things have I thought since I received your letter ; if that should happen which one hates to think of, what is to become of us ? What sort or set of men are to be our taskmasters ? And what sluices are we provided with to save Great Britain from being overflowed ? After what would become of us all ? the thought I grant you is very mean, what would

become of me ? But humanity is frail and querulous ; if the prospect, therefore, of this evil (though I hope far removed) be dreadful to the masters of Mortemar Castle, Hinton St. George, Stanton Harcourt or Bucklebury,<sup>1</sup> what must it be to friend Matt ; *qui oppressus inimicis et invidia, aerumnis et paupertate, morbis et annis* ; or, as it is upon the tombstone, sine goods, sine lands, sine riches ? Why won't Lord Treasurer think of this one half-hour, since he may do it any half-hour, since he intends to do it, I believe ; and possibly, half an hour too late, will be as sorry as myself that it was not done ? But if the Queen is well, hang all the rest ! Gaultier has alarmed this Court ; upon your letter, I was glad to convince them that there was no ground for their apprehensions, your Lordship's letter giving so good an account of her Majesty's indisposition being so happily past ; and accordingly, I continued the appointment and invitation I had made to some of our friends to dine with me yesterday. . . ."<sup>2</sup> He then enumerates the guests and describes his entertainment as above : " but under this mask of mirth, *premit alto corde dolorem*, till I hear from England, more particularly, that the Queen's health is confirmed."

Anne's health, which was very poor, was a constant source of anxiety to the Tories. " There is hardly an instance of any one life to be found in story so important as her Majesty's," said Bolingbroke, meaning that if she died his own power and prospects would also expire. There is something almost admirable in the frankness with which these men, Whigs and Tories alike, gave their first thoughts to their own prosperity.

Prior's moods at this time were in constant alternation

<sup>1</sup> The seats of Lords Oxford, Poulet, Harcourt and Bolingbroke.

<sup>2</sup> Bolingbroke, *Works*, vii, 596.

between despondency and gaiety. There was cause enough for gloom. At any moment he might find himself at the mercy of his enemies. But the company he frequented sang "*Bannissons la melancholie.*" Bolingbroke, presumably to celebrate the peace, was sending gifts to his friends in Paris, and Prior, who was charged with distributing them, makes various amusing references to the difficulty which he had in satisfying the great ladies who were the Secretary's intimates.

"We are all very jocund upon the distribution of our several quantities of your present, which by the enclosed account you will see I have made like a prudent and honest man; as to the latter, our Duchesse de Noailles will not believe a word. *Matthieu est fripon naturellement; il en a bien la mine: Pardi! il a volé la moitié de mon eau-de-miel, il l'a donné à sa religieuse defroquée,* is the return for all my goodness to her. I think I have done all well in giving Madame Parabère a share as from your command, especially since Madame de Torcy will give it to her in the manner she may best like it. If you would have anything bought for you, pray think of it in time; and pray write to me, for I hear from nobody else, either as to the public or my own private affairs." <sup>1</sup>

Matt had "a miniature Venus in a plain box" made for Harry.

He sometimes found the ways of great ladies more troublesome than the banter of Madame de Noailles. The Duchess of Portsmouth, who in her young days had been Charles II's beautiful mistress, was anxious to get back to England—"not remembering that an anachronism of forty years makes a great difference as well in love as politics"—and the minister had gently to dissuade her. The Dowager Countess of Jersey, the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 551.

widow of his old friend, gave him a great deal of trouble. She came to Paris with her younger son Henry Villiers, whom she proposed to make a Roman Catholic. Against this step there were objections which, little as they appeal to us to-day, were at the time undoubtedly entitled to respect. In the first place, such a conversion would have seriously injured the boy's worldly prospects, except in the unlikely event of James Stuart's ascending the throne of England as a Catholic king. In the second place, it would have been very inconvenient for the ministry. The Countess was a Jacobite; her husband had taken part in the earlier and more surreptitious peace negotiations; and the credit of the Tories was not good enough to stand the open conversion of one so intimately connected with them. Bolingbroke, who was related to the Villierses, keenly appreciated both these objections. Without religion himself, holding all churches in equal contempt, he was very far from undervaluing the advantages to be derived from a nominal adherence to the Church established; nor was he blinder to the present dangers of his party. He wrote a letter of remonstrance, therefore, to Lady Jersey, and another to Prior to beg him to take the matter up.

Matt's task was more easily named than performed. "As to our lady dowager," he told Bolingbroke, "you did not know her, I find, as I have done by twenty years' experience: she takes care that the child shall not see me, carries him to-day into the country, under pretence of his health, to a house of the Abbé Gouvernet. That blessed Protestant family, too, on your side, did they not know of this hopeful expedition? You say right, that you imagine this Medea will give us all trouble; nothing can give more: she cries and sighs; but I know her sighs to be wind, and her tears to be water.

The little devil, her husband had once a knife in his hand to go and kill her ; what a puppy was I to hinder him ! Adieu, my dear Lord, God keep us all from such wives, and, above all, from such widows." <sup>1</sup> At first Lady Jersey refused to see the English minister, or to let her son see him ; though Bolingbroke wrote to Henry Villiers himself, counselling him to escape to Prior's house. Then the countess unbent so far as to dine with Prior, but she still kept the boy out of his reach. Presently, however, with the aid of Torcy, Matt succeeded in establishing the desired communication, and eventually, when the thing had become the talk of Versailles, despatched him to England and Westminster School ; while the countess, instead of taking greater offence, veered right round and took to sending for the minister at least once a day to ask his advice in her affairs. " Whether Bohea or Imperial tea is to be drank, it is all done by Mr. Prior's direction." Prior prescribed the Imperial variety, and after tea they toasted Lord Bolingbroke in Usquebaugh.

The distractions caused by difficult ladies must have been rather a pleasant relief from the greater anxiety which was ever weighing on Prior's mind. The news from beyond the Channel became blacker and blacker. Bolingbroke, though hopeful, was manifestly depressed ; and his friend wrote to inspire him.

" England must be saved, my Lord, and it cannot be done either by fools or cowards ; though both these sects of philosophers will find all imaginable faults with you, while you are doing it ; and will wonder why they are not recompensed when it is done ; they tell you everything is dangerous to attempt, and when perfected they always thought it would be so. What is the

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.



substance of all this, my dear Lord? That you must do your duty, that you must think that duty proportioned to the great abilities God has given you, and that you must give your chagrin to the waves and wind. Whilst I say this to you, whom I ought to love, and whom I do love most heartily, am I without possibly more than my share of trouble and apprehension? considering the whimsical circumstances of my fortune, the uncertain situation of my affairs, and my mind constrained to put itself into ten thousand postures, as the caprice of every man that comes from your enchanted isle requires, from Selkirk of Châtelhéault to the Jersey saints and St. Germain's beggars. Through life it is the same, my Lord, and you and I (pardon the familiar conjunction) must bear the importunity, the unreasonableness and impertinence of the world, or you must go to Bucklebury and I to St. John's, which, however disproportioned the retreat may be, let us make it, my dear Lord, as late as ever we can." <sup>1</sup>

Although Prior was unable to sustain the high impersonal note for long, the first part of this passage recalls his letters to Portland. He was evidently fearful of the effect of Bolingbroke's quarrel with Oxford. The Secretary had said that it should make no difference in public affairs. Yet before the end of July he had succeeded in driving the Lord Treasurer from office. On the very day on which Oxford surrendered the White Staff, Matt was writing Bolingbroke a letter in which he protested against the dissensions in the ministry, pointed out to him that they were discrediting England abroad, and spoiled the flavour of the whole by the usual tag of panic self-interest.

"I should be wanting in my duty and friendship to

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 631; 12th March, 1714.

you, if I were silent upon a point which, for me of all men, it is most dangerous to touch; you will easily guess it is the differences and, as they are represented here, the open quarrels between my masters at Whitehall. Who is in the wrong, or who is in the right, is not in my power at this distance to determine; but this thing everyone sees at this Court, from Torcy to Courtenvaux, as I believe they do in yours, from my Lord Chancellor to Miramont, that the honour of our nation daily diminishes, and the credit of the ministers most particularly suffers. I would expatiate upon this topic, if I did not write to a man of your superior sense, and I need make no excuse for touching upon it, because, I am sure, I write to a man who loves me and knows I love him. I have one reason to wish an end of these misunderstandings more than any man else, which is that I foresee my own ruin inevitably fixed in their continuance: but be all that as it will, my Lord Bolingbroke shall never be ashamed of my conduct, or find me behave otherwise than as an honest and an English man.

“Am I to go to Fontainebleau? Am I to come home? Am I to be looked upon? Am I to hang myself? From the present prospect of things, the latter begins to look most eligible. Adieu, my Lord; God bless you! I am ever inviolably yours,

“MATT.

“Monsieur de Torcy has very severe, and, I fear, very exact accounts of us: we are all frightened out of our wits, upon the Duke of Marlborough’s going into England.”<sup>1</sup>

A few days later came the news that Anne was dead.

Prior was in the act of composing a poetic epistle to the Queen, asking for her picture.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 677.

The train of equipage and pomp of state,  
The shining sideboard and the burnished plate,  
Let other ministers, great Anne, require,  
And partial fall thy gift to their desire.  
To the fair portrait of my sovereign dame,  
To that alone, eternal be my claim. . . .

Thus he began ; and proceeded for twenty more lines  
or so in the familiar strain of panegyric.

Here, Stator Jove, and Phoebus King of Verse,  
The votive tablet I suspend. . . .

Here his pen also was suspended, for he learned that she  
to whom his petition was addressed was beyond hearing  
or granting it.

Suspense, indeed, was the atmosphere in which he was  
to live for some months to come. It must have been  
with a sinking heart that he learned of the succession of  
events : of the frustration of Bolingbroke's schemes by  
Somerset and Argyll, and the Queen's death-bed appoint-  
ment of the amiable but ineffectual Shrewsbury to the  
Treasury ; of the proclamation of George I, the rout of  
the Tories, and the formation of a Whig ministry. He  
acted as his position demanded, putting himself into  
immediate communication with the new king and per-  
forming the customary duties of English minister. But  
he knew that this was no ordinary change of sovereigns,  
and that the return of the Whigs to power meant far  
more than that the Tories were out of office. There  
were reprisals ahead.

Prior's fears were aggravated by his necessities.  
Though denied the title of ambassador, he had been  
spending money at a higher rate than was allowed to  
ministers of that rank. His salary, as usual, was in  
arrears ; and though Oxford, just before his dismissal,  
had ordered the payment of what was due to him, the  
subsequent upheaval had indefinitely delayed the

fulfilment of the order. The Lords Justices who governed England from the death of Anne until the arrival of George would do nothing in the matter; and the King, though expressing sympathy with Prior, required an examination of the Queen's debts before they should be settled.

Poor Prior felt very forlorn. There was, however, in the new ministry a man with whom he had once been on terms of the greatest intimacy; who had been his schoolfellow and a partner in his earliest literary venture. Halifax, with an earldom and a Garter, was First Commissioner of the Treasury. Matt determined to make an effort to end the estrangement which had lasted since his momentous vote in Parliament more than a dozen years before. On 1st October he wrote him the following letter.<sup>1</sup>

"MY LORD,—

"I have reason to hope that what I have writ to

<sup>1</sup> On the same day he wrote to Lord Townshend, Secretary of State in place of Bolingbroke: "I am sure you will not think that I make you a compliment of form only, when I congratulate to you the honour of being secretary *bonâ fide*. I had rather you had the seals than any man in England, except myself; and I wish you all satisfaction and prosperity in the course of your business, and in every part of your private life. I need not ask you for your favour; for, taking it for granted that you think me an honest man, I assure myself of everything from you that is good-natured and generous. How long I am, or am not, to be here, or when I am to be recalled, your Lordship will soonest know; all that I can tell you upon that subject is, that our friend and ally, Mr. Cunningham, is mightily pleased with me. Pray, my Lord, do me all the good you can; and if, as we say here, the names of party and faction are to be lost, pray get me pricked down for one of the first that is desirous to come into so happy an agreement. And as I know so good a design as the obtaining and insuring peace suits admirably well with the sweetness of your Lordship's temper, I'll take my oath on't, it graduates extremely well with my present disposition and circumstances. I cannot presume to hope for the happiness of seeing you very soon; for though I should be recalled to-morrow, I shall savour so strong of a French court that I must take my quarantine in some Kentish village before I dare come near the Cock-pit." [*Original Letters* (ed. Rebecca Warner, 1817), p. 13.]

the Lord Justices in general has been agreeable to the expectation of their Excellencies, and to the tenour of my duty; and having some particular friends in that great commission and (as at least I flatter myself) no enemies, I do not question but that I have been favourably represented to his Majesty. I hear that parties and names of distinction are to be forgot, and that (as when I was a commissioner of trade I have found it expressed in the West Indian dialect) the hatchet of discord is to be buried under the highest tree in the forest and the calumet of goodwill to be carried from Susquehanna to Pemaquia. I hear, too, that your Lordship is to be one of the main instruments in this good work. If so, pray put me down for one of your most zealous under-workmen. By what I have some time since writ to your Lordship, and by what you have lately seen writ by me to others, you know my sentiments upon this subject; and as I can safely swear that I have hitherto acted for the good of my country (according to the directions and orders given to me) with integrity and honour, I add to you, my Lord, that I have nothing more at heart than to live in the strictest rules of duty and respect with those whom his Majesty pleases to employ in his ministry, and with you, my Lord, to renew that friendship which, as it began when we were children, ought to be continued to our graves. Has it not been uneasy sometimes to you to have suspended the operations of it? And have not you punished yourself in refusing me your favour? Fourteen years, my Lord, is long enough for you to have borne other people's resentments against your friend Matt. Let your kindness to me for the time to come make amends for the coldness of the past. I would not beg your favour, but I would have you give it to me,

and put me in the wrong if by my future actions I do not merit it. Begin by doing me the greatest good office imaginable in assuring me of his Majesty's favour, and improving that good opinion which I have reason to hope he has conceived of my zeal for his service, and be persuaded that on my part you shall receive all the acknowledgment that a grateful and affectionate mind can make to you. I am with all possible duty and respect, and if you please to give me leave to add, my Lord, with strict and inviolable friendship, your Lordship's most faithful, obedient and humble servant,  
" M. P."

To this pathetic appeal Prior got no immediate reply, and after the lapse of a fortnight he wrote at greater length, renewing his petition for Halifax's friendship, protesting his loyalty to the House of Hanover, and describing his financial position in detail. "Give me leave in the meantime, my Lord, to represent to you that, having been six weeks at Fontainebleau, the most expensive place upon earth except Paris itself, I returned hither two days since with eleven horses, thirteen servants, and in a pomp of woe that put me in mind of Patroclus's funeral, myself melancholy enough, though the horses did not weep, but may be they did not reflect that their provender was not paid for." The letter ends on a note of altruism which is pleasant after its pardonable, but somewhat monotonous, insistence on the writer's own case. Prior asks Halifax to see that their old college friend, Richard Shelton, was continued in his employment as a commissioner of the Stamp Office, and that Adrian Drift, the poet's secretary, kept the first clerkship of the Plantation Office. Drift had held his post for fourteen years, Shelton his but a few months. Prior calls the latter his *fidus Achates* and the partner of his inmost

soul, and had been importunate with both Oxford and Bolingbroke on his behalf. He was the Dick of *Alma*; and though references to him are but brief and intermittent in the poet's correspondence, the friendship between the two was long and peculiarly intimate.

While Prior was writing his second letter to Halifax, James Montagu was writing to Prior informing him of his brother's willingness to renew relations and determination to help him. To this Prior replied in a letter full of gratitude and what bears an ugly resemblance to readiness to abandon old friends.

"You will easily believe me, my dear Jemmy, how agreeable your letter was to me since it assured me of the continuance of your friendship, and of Lord Halifax's generous intentions to renew his favour to me. I was always truly sensible of your good wishes towards me, and of your kind concern in my behalf, but never had so much reason as at present to thank you upon that account. The future satisfaction of my life will be to live with my master as the most obliged and most faithful of his servants ought to be, and if I do not expatiate upon that subject it is because my interest is so visibly concerned in the thing that whatever I may say would look as flowing from a less noble principle than that of a sincere and pure friendship; and since I am resolved to have no future contests with any man upon any other account than who shall be most zealous for his Majesty's service, and the interest of Great Britain, I persuade myself that I shall every day find new occasion of making my court to the Earl of Halifax. I have enemies, Jemmy—who doubts it? He who has not can deserve to have no friends, but with this, as far as duty and diligence can have pleaded in my behalf, I have no reason to think myself ill with some very

great men, and, give me leave to say to you, with the greatest. The rest will be easy enough. I have known courts a long time, if the sun rises the mists are very soon dispersed; and in one word, my dear Jemmy, as I have neither betrayed England, nor been bribed by France, as I have nothing to fear from the noise of my supposed enemies, I ought to expect very much from the honour of my real friends. In three years that I have been here it will not, I presume, be expected that I should be accountable for what has proceeded in the same time from the ambition, folly, heat or error of others. A coffee-house may pass its censure upon me, but under any jury in England your friend Matt will be judged worthy the favour of his sovereign and the friendship of his master. You shall not be judge (though the King has made you such) in this case, for you may possibly be too partial to me. As I congratulate you upon your honour, I beg you will do the like in my name to my Lord Halifax upon his being Earl and Knight of the Garter. My own dreadful circumstances I have represented to him in such a manner as that I hope he has already found means to discharge me to this present day of my writing, and if at home nothing has been done for me the more remains for him to do. Remember that your friend Dick Shelton, and your servant Drift, be kept in their places, both which will redound to the reputation of him whom we used to call Charles, and to the satisfaction of your friend MAT."

Meanwhile, Prior had received a short and business-like but generous note from Halifax, in which the hatchet was buried once for all. This must have crossed Matt's third importunity. The First Commissioner of the Treasury was sincerely willing to help him, but on



looking into his affairs found that they were not easy to settle.<sup>1</sup>

Matt's position grew more and more uncomfortable. The Earl of Stair was sent to Paris as ambassador, with directions to relieve him of all his papers, which, of course, included his compromising correspondence with Bolingbroke. For making this surrender, Prior fell into very bad odour with the Tories, who freely accused him of betraying them.<sup>2</sup> The accusation, in spite of his professions to the Montagus, was on the whole unjust; Prior's choice was practically Hobson's; though he may, as has been suggested, have thought to propitiate the powers, and hasten the payment of his debts, by holding out hopes of information.<sup>3</sup> How little information he was prepared to furnish, was soon to be shown.

The payment of his debts was a very urgent necessity. From the beginning of 1715 he was without official position,<sup>4</sup> yet he was incapable of returning to

<sup>1</sup> Two letters from Halifax to Prior of an earlier date than this series are printed in the *Longleat Papers* [iii, 443, 444]. But since they indicate a state of established friendship which certainly did not exist at the time, some error has presumably crept into the dating. They seem to be antedated by a year.

<sup>2</sup> "Prior, qui étoit ici plenipotentiaire d'Angleterre, a eu l'imprudence ou la malice de donner à milord Stairs, à qui il avoit ordre de remettre tous ses papiers, une lettre que milord Bolingbroke lui avoit écrite de Londres et qu'on explique en mal. Prior prétend se tirer d'affaire en abandonnant tous les ministres qui l'avoient employé." [Dangeau, *Journal*, xv, 401.] "Et en condamnant leur conduite," adds Dangeau in a repetition of this charge. [*Ibid.* 402.] Under date 8th May (*new style*), 1715, Dangeau gives a detail elsewhere unrecorded: "Prior a été maltraité en Angleterre par un particulier qui prétendoit avoir sujet de se plaindre de lui, et les ministres de l'ancien gouvernement qui prétendent que Prior les a trahis se sont réjouis de sa triste aventure." [*Ibid.* 413.]

<sup>3</sup> Swift, *Correspondence* (ed. Ball), ii, 278 n.

<sup>4</sup> His powers were revoked 5th January; the King's letter ordering him to surrender his papers bears date 15th January. Dangeau [*Journal*, xv, 287], prematurely notes his recall 1st December (*new style*), 1714.

England. The amount of his expenses alarmed the Treasury, and, as usually happens, alarm had a numbing effect on that office. The weeks passed and nothing was sent him, while he stayed in Paris at the mercy of his creditors. A new commission of customs had been appointed, and he was not on it. "I find myself divested of my commission at the customs," he wrote to Hanmer, "my expenses here objected to at the Treasury, and my person neither in very good health nor good heart, detained a kind of political prisoner, my affairs discanted on and judged by every French marquis or councillor, duchesse or bourgeoisie, according to the measure of their capacity and the extent of their compassion."

This bad state of affairs was ended in February, 1715, by the payment of what was due to him for salary and £2,408 for extraordinary expenses. At last he was free to go home, and he set out at the end of March. But if he flattered himself that the change would be for the better, he was soon disillusioned. Dangeau, in his enormous journal, notes the ex-plenipotentiary's return to England, "*où on ne le croit pas trop en surêté de la vie.*"

The Whigs had come into power determined to call their predecessors to account, and they lost little time in getting to business. King George's first Parliament met 17th March, and on 13th April a Committee of Secrecy to inquire into the Peace of Utrecht was appointed, with that rising statesman, Robert Walpole, in the chair. The result of the deliberations of this body was the impeachment of Oxford, Bolingbroke, Strafford and Ormonde. Ormonde and Bolingbroke fled to France and joined the Pretender. Oxford and Strafford stayed to face the music.

The report of the committee, with its appendices, fills

over 200 packed columns of Cobbett's *Parliamentary History*. Much of it deals with the papers which Stair had received from the luckless Prior, who was one of the first to be called to account for the sins of Toryism.

On 9th June, Walpole, on behalf of the Committee of Secrecy, acquainted the House "that he had a report to present according to their order, but that he had the commands of the committee to make a motion to the House before he read the report; that there are in the report matters of the highest importance; that, although the committee had power to send for persons, papers and records, they did not think fit to make use thereof, believing it to be necessary in order to bring offenders to justice, that some persons should be secured before it is possible they should know what they are examined to; and lest they should have notice from what should be read in the report to make their escape, he was commanded by the committee, according to former precedents, to move that a warrant may be issued by Mr. Speaker to apprehend certain persons who shall be named to him by the chairman of the said committee; and that no members may be permitted to go out of the House." Whereupon, after the customary ceremonies and precautions, the Speaker, Spencer Compton, issued his warrant to the Serjeant-at-Arms to take into custody several persons, and particularly Mr. Matthew Prior and Mr. Thomas Harley, Lord Oxford's cousin. Prior was at once arrested, Harley some hours later.

For a week the prisoners were confined to their own houses, which lay a few doors apart in Duke Street—a proximity which had its consequences—and on 16th June Prior was summoned to appear before the Secret Committee.

## CHAPTER X

### THE SECRET COMMITTEE

OF his examination before the Secret Committee, Prior himself wrote an account which, since it is as readable a piece of prose as he ever produced, and is accessible in no edition pleasant to the modern eye, may as well be given here not only substantially but literally.<sup>1</sup>

"In outward appearance they were all very civil; set me a chair equal to the table where they sat, and next to Secretary Stanhope, who had the books and papers of the Secretary's office before him. Mr. Walpole, the chairman, said little more than mere compliment. Mr. Lechmere with great industry hid from me, and often himself looked into, papers in folio, unbound and covered with a blue sheet. I did not then know what they were, but during the examination I perceived it was the report, then printed, and in some few days after published. He began with an affected eloquence, that as I had served in a very high employment, and with very great applause, the Committee relied upon my candour and probity: that as what they asked me

<sup>1</sup> It is printed in *The History of His Own Time*, p. 417; and *Parl. Hist.*, vii, *App. col.* ccxxi. In the former (p. 416) appears the following preface: "The severest article against the Inquisition is, that those who are called before it are not allowed a copy of their indictment, but must themselves divine the cause why they are imprisoned. I was called before the Secret Committee, and sworn by Mr. Justice Boscawen to no particular indictment; the Committee, on the contrary, assuring me I was not accused of any crime: the Secretary of State assuring the Committee that by the King's order what I should say should no way affect me. After which they proceeded to a wild examination, not only of what I had transacted as her Majesty's plenipotentiary for three years before, but of what I might have any ways known or heard of; that the Earl of Oxford, the Lord Bolingbroke and others concerned in her Majesty's affairs had acted."

was for the King's service, so what I answered would be for my own honour. After this some of them began with several vague questions: What I knew of the negotiation? How long I had been acquainted with the Abbé Gaultier? If the propositions came first from France, or if we sent them? And desired me to give them an account of whatever I could of that whole matter; which, it seems, they thought I was so ready to do, that some of them took their pens and paper, as if I were to begin a sermon and they to take short notes.

"I said that as I had always acted abroad by the authority of the Crown of England, and had, in obedience to the King's commands, given up all the memorials and papers which related to that part of the peace in which I had a share, I was desirous to answer the honourable Committee (before whom I understood such papers were) in everything that might help to explain them; that my books were already before them; and, as I had written to Mr. Secretary Stanhope, those books must even speak for themselves. The Committee seemed to acquiesce in my answer. Lord Coningsby whispered the chairman, and said, 'No, we will begin with the money.'

"The Committee then desired to know what money I drew from the Treasury in 1711, when I went into France. I answered, 'Two hundred pounds'; and, as I remembered, that was the sum. I had either credit from Mr. Clifford, or his correspondent, or from Monsieur Cantillon: I could not well remember which, it being now four years since. 'Had you these bills,' some of them said, 'from my Lord Treasurer?' I replied, 'No.' They asked me, 'Was it by his order?' I said I hoped there was no occasion for a reply to that question. I presumed it would be found, as other money expended

on the like occasion, by direction of the Sovereign. I found they were not pleased with this answer. Walpole said, 'Will you think a little of the method in which this examination is to proceed? And Mr. Prior will be pleased in the meantime to retire a little.'

"When I was called in again, the same question was asked, and the same answer returned. I added that I well hoped those sums, and several others of much greater importance, were paid; that otherwise, for want of knowledge in the Crown laws, I should find myself a beggar; and from an hotel in Paris might spend the rest of my days in the Counter. And here I addressed myself to Mr. Stanhope, as to what I had writ to him concerning my debts. He said that nothing of all this concerned me. *Prior*: 'I must apply myself to you upon another head. I must own myself unexperienced in the method of Parliament; I have no papers by me; I have no counsel; for want of memory or judgment I may err; and though, gentlemen, I am accused of nothing, I know not but that I may accuse myself through inadvertency or mistake.'

"Here Mr. Stanhope rose up and told the Committee that he had the King's particular direction that whatever I said to them, or they to the House of Commons, should not be of any prejudice to myself. I took a sheet of paper, which lay before me, and wrote this down, as I did what they had already said to me. Here, after they had whispered, and some even separated themselves from the table to confer in a corner of the room, the chairman told me I might withdraw; which I did, leaving the notes I had taken upon the table.

"When I was called in again, I found their civility much abated, and the battery quite changed. The most confused questions were put to me, upon several

heads, backward and forward, by Lechmere and Boscawen and Coningsby (the two first of whom I think understood not one word of what they were saying). Coningsby at length prevailed. 'Mr. Prior, you were sent out that you might have time to recollect more particularly upon whom you had credit, when my Lord of Oxford sent you into France.' *Prior*: 'I have great respect to the Earl of Oxford; but he never sent me into France.' And turning to Mr. Secretary Stanhope, who had the books of the office of 1711 in his hand, I said that as I had the honour to be sent into France by the Queen's especial appointment and immediate direction, I presumed the copy of my powers were to be found in the books before him. He turning to it: 'Mr. Prior, is this the copy of your instructions?' *Prior*: 'I believe it is; but to give the Committee no further trouble on this head, I am ready either now, or any other time, to produce the original, as I think it may tend to my service.' Being asked of whom I received money in France, I answered, 'Of Monsieur Cantillon.' *Boscawen*: 'Was he not a Papist?' *Prior*: 'Else, sir, he could not have been a banker at Paris, which he had been for several years before I knew him. In one word, he was the common banker to whom the English addressed themselves, and I think Clifford of Amsterdam was his correspondent.' Stanhope and Walpole I found frowning and nodding at each other, and extremely ashamed at this vile stuff.

"Being sent out, and called in again, I found the thunder broke out. Walpole referred it to Stanhope to speak. *Stanhope*: 'The Committee are not satisfied with your behaviour to them. I have already told you that the Lords above and the Committee here have taken notice that they find a constant correspondence

on your side to Lord Treasurer, but no answers from him ; whereas all your letters from Lord Bolingbroke are entire, and commonly in their right order. Some of those indeed are missing.' The whole Committee echoed the same thing. *Prior* : ' I was told some hours since, by this honourable Committee, that I should be asked nothing that might prejudice myself. I am a good deal confused ; I have no counsel ; and, with great respect, I look upon this to be a downright accusation of myself, as if I should have held any correspondence I was unwilling to declare. I must refer myself to you in this point, Mr. Stanhope. The letters that we receive, when abroad, from the Secretaries of State, we keep, copying our answers to them, both which justify our acting according to our orders sent us ; and I presume it will be found that my letters, which you have in your own keeping, answer those written to me by the Secretaries of State under whose departments I acted ; which letters you have likewise. You have also the letters I have wrote to the Lord Treasurer in my books, at least those of them that related to the public affair and consequently were worth keeping. I did not, nor could I, expect a constant correspondence from him. What I wrote was for his information ; what use his Lordship made of that information, I had reason to presume was for the Queen's service ; and the answers and directions to me were to come by the Secretary of State.' *Committee* : ' It is very strange that not above two or three letters should appear from my Lord Treasurer. Did he not write more to you ? ' *Prior* : ' He writ to me several times, and I obeyed his commands intimated to me therein. Those commands performed, the letters were of no use, and I no more kept them than I did letters received from other noblemen, the Duke of Buckingham, the Lord



Halifax, Lord Harcourt, then Lord Chancellor, etc. They related no otherwise to the negotiation than in commending me, assuring me that he represented my services to the Queen in a right light, and wishing a speedy end to the negotiation, that I might come home to him.'

"I was sent out again, and recalled; was asked how many letters I might in all have received from my Lord Treasurer, and what was the substance of any of them. *Prior*: 'As to the number, I cannot particularly tell: I received a letter from him sometimes of five, sometimes of ten or twelve lines, ordering me to pay sums of money to persons who had the Queen's pension, and were then in France, or recommending some of his particular friends to my acquaintance, or, which I thought much better, telling me he had ordered the payment of my bills; but I might very safely affirm that I had no letter that could possibly concern the Committee or anybody else. I have one letter that as Lord Treasurer he writ to me, which related to the payment of the dowry of King James's Queen Mary, a thing publicly transacted, and known here in England; but as no progress was made in that affair during my stay in France, and that it did not belong to the negotiation of the peace, I had not indeed given up that letter, but, as I thought, I could find it, or the copy of it, if it should have been thought of any use. In the meantime I thought proper, in case anything had been done in that matter, to keep that letter for my own justification; as indeed it would have been my order.' *Boscawen*: 'Sir, you say you do not know how many letters you had. Might you have ten?' *Prior*: 'I believe I might.' *Boscawen*: 'Might you have fourteen?' *Prior*: 'I believe I might.' *Boscawen*: 'Might you have sixteen?' *Prior*: 'Indeed, Mr.

Boscawen, I have told you that I cannot answer you to any indefinite (*sic*) number.' It was still urged with great vehemence that I kept a constant correspondence with my Lord Treasurer. *Prior*: 'I am very far from denying it; but he did not keep a constant correspondence with me. It was my duty to write to him, and he was to make what use he pleased of my letters. I complained sometimes of the objections I met with at the Court of France in the execution of my orders; and was very glad when by the letters from the Secretary of State, I found my difficulty made easier. But, gentlemen, since we are upon this subject, throughout the whole course of my letters to my Lord Treasurer, and even in those I wrote to the Duke of Shrewsbury, after his Grace's return, both in England and Ireland, I still complained that my Lord Treasurer did not write to me.' And here, indeed, being very much teased and vexed, my Lord Coningsby raving and threatening that these letters must be produced, I said, 'If there be such letters in the world, that contain the secrets of the negotiation written by my Lord Treasurer, it might be very well presumed his Lordship kept copies of them, and he must produce them. For,' said I, 'by the eternal God, I know of no such letters; and you know, my Lord, that your countryman is no very exact correspondent.' This I said, having known that my Lord Coningsby had troubled great men, if not my Lord Treasurer particularly, with letters, who had never taken care to answer him. I grant this was very foolishly said; for one should never provoke a hedgehog. *Coningsby* (breaking out into a great passion): 'This is imposing upon the Committee!' *Prior*: 'Imposing, my Lord, is a very hard word.' He lifted up his voice in anger, and was going on; but Stanhope, yet louder than

he, swore that he could produce every individual scrip of paper that had been written to him by any man alive, or that he had written to any man during his being a minister abroad. *Prior*: 'Mr. Stanhope, I am sorry I cannot do the like; if it be so, you are the most careful minister that ever yet were sent abroad.' They proceeded in asking me to give an account of what, they said, I must needs know of the meeting of the Lords at my house with Mesnager and Gaultier. I had already heard that they had consulted their friends of the law upon that point, and had determined to fix upon that meeting, wherein the preliminaries were signed, as an accusation of treason—how justly I leave to the judgment of all disinterested and honest men; since first, in the nature of the thing, it is impossible for any two nations in war to come ever to an accommodation, or begin any plan upon which a future peace may be founded, without some overture and intervention of this kind. . .<sup>1</sup> Though this procedure will without doubt hereafter appear consonant to common sense, conducive to the safety and good of Great Britain, and justifiable by the universal custom and law of nations, *nunc non erat his locus*. I said Monsieur Mesnager had often been at my house; that the Secretary of State had seen him there; that I had ate and drank and been abroad with him several times. They took great hold of this. Boscawen expressed himself with great joy: 'This is more than we knew before!' And from thence they ran wildly back: When I knew Gaultier? Where I had been with Mesnager? I answered to this in as general terms as I could. The chairman perceived that they would lose their point in this multiplicity of questions,

<sup>1</sup> Prior here diverges into a defence of the private negotiation of preliminaries, and cites Bolingbroke's letter to the Queen of 20th September, and the unused warrant of 17th September [see pp. 180 *et seqq.*]

and, checking their speed, restrained it to this one demand. *Chairman*: 'What lords were present at your house at the meeting when the preliminary articles were talked of or signed?' I answered, 'The two Secretaries of State'; for it is certain they were so, their names appearing in the instrument. *Chairman*: 'Was my Lord of Oxford there?' *Prior*: 'I cannot recollect it. One of the lords was absent; whether the Duke of Shrewsbury or the Earl of Oxford I cannot tell. In all sincerity and honour this is truth.' They grew extremely angered upon it, and sent me out to recollect if both these lords were not present.

"I came in and assured them again that as well as I could remember a transaction of which I took no notes, and which was now above three years past, and of which I was so far from expecting to be called to any account that I thought it was an honour to me, I could not determine which of the two were absent. I said again that this was fact, that I do not remember it: I have only an idea that one of them was absent. The answer indeed had this effect, that it was the same thing as if they were both absent, since they could not determine which of them was present. But upon this meeting no less accusation than an article of high treason was to be founded. Was anything more difficult ever put upon a man, than to endeavour to extort an evidence from me, in order to bring those to the scaffold who were friends and patrons, under whose orders formerly, and with whom jointly now, I had the honour to act, by the Queen's directions, and in a matter not only innocent but laudable! Or could anything be more absurd or more inhuman than to propose to me a question by the answering of which I might (according to them) prove myself a traitor! Since, as I had heard,

every man who is a partner is a principle in treason. And notwithstanding their solemn promise that nothing which I could say should hurt myself, I had no reason to trust them, for they violated that promise about five hours after (as I shall say anon). However, I owned I was there present. Whether this was wisely done or no, I leave to my friends to determine.

“From my being taken up by order of the House of Commons, this examination was just a week. They now, after I had been turned out and returned again, interrogated me if, since my being taken into custody, I had not seen my Lord of Oxford or any of his relations. I said I had seen my Lord of Oxford the last Sunday at Mr. Thomas Harley’s house; and was going on to explain that Mr. Thomas Harley and I, who were taken up at the same time, (living within three doors of each other) commonly dined together at one or other of our houses, our respective messengers guarding us; that on Sunday going to dine with Mr. Harley, I saw my Lord of Oxford at the stair-head, going out; that I asked him if he dined with us: he told me he was to dine in better company; that this was all that passed between us: the messenger at the bottom of the stairs heard every word I said to him. As I was telling this, they answered it was sufficient, I had seen my Lord of Oxford and his near relation; which was the question asked.

“I here was ordered to retire, and when I was called in again the chairman, from amongst many books and papers which he had before him (and the Secretary of State had on the other side as many; and I perceived many of them were my own), the chairman, I say, abruptly enough threw one half-sheet of the large demy paper, written very foul and razed in several places,

which, indeed, when he gave into my hand, I hardly knew what it was, so far as to give any reasonable account of it, it being without date or title, and, as I say, very imperfect as to the very words and style. He asked me drily, and without any other previous word, if I knew that hand. *Prior* : ' There are two hands in it ; one is very like the hand I write when first I make any brouillon.' *One or two of the Committee* : ' Sir, what do you mean by a brouillon ? ' <sup>1</sup> *Prior* : ' When I write anything at first only for my own memory, as to what I would draw up after in a more perfect manner.' I perused this piece of paper and, upon a little reflection, directing myself to Mr. Stanhope, said I believed this paper contained some notes upon a letter I received from his predecessor, my Lord Bolingbroke. He was apprised of this before ; for he readily turned to the letter, which was registered in the office-book. I added that I thought there were some notes I had taken in the French language to enable me to speak more particularly to Monsieur de Torcy of the matters mentioned in the said Secretary's letter. As that letter was written four years before, and I was not in possession of my own letters, the Secretary himself and the Committee could best inform themselves of the substance thereof. There was written, "*My Lord Tr. ne doute point que la Cour de France n'y trouve point de remède.*" Now whatever lord that might mean, they had already printed it my Lord Treasurer ; and in so doing had given that sentence the wrongest construction imaginable, as proving that my Lord Treasurer would give up Tournay to France ; whereas the whole hint was meant to renew to the ministers at that Court that Tournay was to be given

<sup>1</sup> A favourite word of Prior's, used in connection with poetic fragments printed by Mr. Waller or still in manuscript.

to the Allies ; and it was to keep the Court of France from endeavouring to hope the contrary. As what was in the brouillon was sometimes an abridgement and sometimes a verbal translation of my Lord Bolingbroke's letter, which Mr. Stanhope still held close, and as I read the French into English, I asked him if the same sense was in the letter. He did not deny it. Coningsby grew extremely angry, and on a sudden broke out into some expressions which neither he should have uttered, nor will I repeat ; and so I was ordered to withdraw again ; which was into the next room, where not only a messenger of the House of Commons, but a door-keeper of the Secretary's office, waited all day, and were still ready to receive me.

“ Being called in again, I was interrogated without method or connection, as any member of the Committee pleased, and indeed with confusion and disorder enough among themselves ; for they sometimes stopped each other's question and proposed new ones of their own. At last it came to this. *Chairman* : ‘ Mr. Prior, we cannot doubt but that you are apprized of the whole affair of Tournay. Did my Lord ever write about Tournay ? ’ *Prior* : ‘ I cannot readily answer, as not understanding the force of the question. I believe my Lord Treasurer may have writ to me concerning Tournay at the beginning of the negotiation. I am sure he has spoke to me about Tournay. I may be mistaken as to the time, but I think in 1711 the French insisted upon their having Tournay ; but I very well remember that the Queen's instructions to her ambassadors for the general peace were positive that the Dutch should have it : I understood the negotiation to continue always upon that foot.’ I added that as the affair of the barrier was transacted at Utrecht, I had nothing in my instructions

relating to that whole matter, otherwise than as it might relate in general to the peace. 'What I have of the whole negotiation is before you.' Here Walpole and Stanhope grew mightily perplexed; one in a sullen and t'other in an unbounded passion. Coningsby raved outright. I may justly protest that I could not conceive the cause of this disorder; for I did not know that they had already founded their high treason upon the articles of Tournay, against my Lord Treasurer; nor can I since comprehend why they did.<sup>1</sup> To shew the justice as well as the good judgment of these men, it must certainly appear not only extravagant but ridiculous to all who think righter than the Committee, that is, to all men living, that an article of high treason should be founded against an English minister upon Tournay, which was not given up to the French, and no mention ever made of Lisle, which actually was given up. This by the way. It may be further observed that at that time not one third part of the Committee themselves did know upon what point the accusations either against the Earl of Oxford, or any man else, were to be grounded; several of them having since told me themselves that they never either drew up or read the report; but that those things came to them, as they merrily expressed it, ready cut and dried.

"But to return to my journal; this various and incoherent manner of examination having now lasted above nine hours. Two of my masters (by the way), Mr. Onslow and Mr. Erle, had left the Committee almost at the beginning of the day; for to give them their due, they asked me very few questions while there, by going away seemed ashamed of the proceeding. And now Walpole himself grew weary of it, and was going, but hindered and as it were kept in the chair by Mr. Stanhope,

<sup>1</sup> See eleventh article of Oxford's impeachment.



who said openly they could not go on without the chairman. I was ordered to withdraw, and during about half an hour's recess into the next room, or rather passage, as the door was by chance opened, I heard them extremely warm and loud with one another. Whilst I was in this little room, in which the messenger under whose custody I was and a doorkeeper of the Secretary's office, as I have already said, were waiting, Coningsby came out by a backway, as Boscawen did by the fore-door. In this room was a trunk, and in it several papers and memorials, to which the Committee had recourse during the examination. The trunk was open, and I could not but perceive by the endorsements that many of the papers were my own. Coningsby whispered the officers to take care that I should not come nigh the trunk, and really looked on me more like a fury than a man; though certainly I had all the right imaginable to see every paper that related to me in my examination, which was pretended to be made upon no other foot than that the King should be informed of what I had done for his service in the negotiation of the peace; and if the Committee themselves had really a mind to be apprized of the truth as to fact, the hindering a man whom they intended should become an evidence from seeing his own papers was but an ill method towards his giving them a clearer intelligence.

"I was now called in for the last time, and I found that they had collected several heads of what they thought proper I should set my hand to. I read them, and made some objections thereunto, but to no purpose. I said that to many questions I had not, nor could, answer in the positive manner that was there set down; that as to divers facts, I could not take things upon my memory; that as to others, I had indeed said I believed,

I thought, I had heard, or understood they were so ; that the omission of these words made me say positively, and as an evidence, what I should not be able to maintain, having only answered them as my memory served me, and as much as I knew of the heads upon which I had been interrogated ; knowing that they themselves had blamed my answers for being very imperfect ; and I had more than once told them I was sorry I could not answer them more fully. I objected against these words : *He confesses that since his confinement he has conversed with the Earl of Oxford and his nearest relations.* I did not, I said, confess. Confession supposes a crime : I was told I was accused of none. I said I had seen the Earl of Oxford at Mr. Thomas Harley's ; and as I was going to tell the thing again—' Jesus ! ' said Coningsby, ' How perjured is this man ! ' Prior : ' My Lord, have a care of——.' Coningsby : ' No, sir ; 'tis you that must have a care.' Seeing now the face of the Committee against me, knowing and presuming that if ever the Duke of Shrewsbury, the Earl of Oxford or Lord Bolingbroke himself should be brought to trial, I must be sure before the Lords have an opportunity of explaining what I had said, and declaring what usage I had found from the Committee, I signed the paper. I cannot here omit a ridiculous instance of my Middlesex Justice's skill in the law : he was just going to set his name on the left hand of the paper, where I was to have set mine ; and if he had not been timely cautioned by the chairman, it would have been the deposition of *Hugh Boscawen, jurat. coram me, Matt. Prior.*

" When I had thus signed the paper, the chairman told me that the Committee were not at all satisfied with my behaviour, nor could give such an account of it to the House that might merit their favour in my behalf ; that

at present they thought fit to lay me under a stricter confinement than that of my own house. Here Boscawen played the moralist, and Coningsby the Christian; but both very awkwardly. Boscawen said that he had often heard Mr. Stepney, who was a wise man and our old friend, repeat this proverb: *Near is my shirt, but nearer my skin*; and told me, if I had remembered that saying, and acted according to it, it would have been better for me. And Coningsby said he had known me a long time and was heartily sorry for my condition; but all this proceeded from my own fault. Now this kind commiseration did not last above a minute; for the messenger to whose house they intended to confine me being called, Coningsby asked him if his house were secured by bolts and bars. The messenger, who is by birth a gentleman, and a very good-natured man, was astonished at the question; and answered that he never had any in his custody but Parliament prisoners (as he expressed it) and there were neither bolts nor bars in his house. At which Coningsby very angrily said, 'Sir, you must secure this prisoner; it is for the safety of the nation; if he escapes, you shall answer for it.' And now I met with another hardship, which indeed I could not have expected, as I had all day taken notes of the heads of their examination and my answers, and particularly that Mr. Stanhope had, by his Majesty's order, informed the Committee that from whatever I should say in this examination nothing should or ought to redound to my own prejudice: nor indeed could it be imagined I should answer on any other foot; for without the King's consent, I doubt if I ought at all to have answered to the Committee."

The substance of this paper calls for little comment. Its clarity is admirable, and suggests that had Prior

lived in a more enlightened age, he might have added to his many activities that of parliamentary reporter. As excellent as his narrative of questions and answers is his indication of the characteristics of his inquisitors; the violence of Coningsby, on whom he took revenge by lampooning him in *The Viceroy* and bracketing him with the Devil in *Downhall*; the stupidity of Boscawen; Walpole's and Stanhope's honest desire for a decent examination degenerating into perplexity and irritation at the foolish conduct of their colleagues and the prevarications of Prior.

For that he did prevaricate cannot be doubted. It is impossible to believe that he had forgotten whether Oxford was at Duke Street when the ministers met Mesnager, and it seems highly probable that more than he would admit passed between Prior and the earl outside Thomas Harley's house. One thing is certain. At considerable personal risk, he did his best to shield the late Lord Treasurer, though whether the dearth of Oxford's letters among his papers was accidental or arranged cannot be determined. The results of his examination were, of course, kept secret, but rumours got abroad. Some said he had betrayed Oxford; others that he had refused to do so, and lay a close prisoner in danger of hanging in consequence. He was not hanged, but, in accordance with the decision of the Committee as laid before the House of Commons on the day after his examination, he was removed from Duke Street to the house of the messenger in Brownlow Street, Long Acre. On 20th September the Secret Committee, speaking through Walpole, gave the House a brief report of Prior's examination, and submitted the question of the advisability of setting him at liberty. But both report and rider were very unfavourably worded, and Matt remained in durance for more than a year longer.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE POEMS

THE record of Prior's imprisonment is necessarily a blank.<sup>1</sup> The *Answer to the Secret Committee* was probably begun during the first months. It is, as far as it goes, an able criticism, from the Tory point of view, of the Committee's report. That it was intended for anonymous publication seems clear from the fact that Prior wrote of himself in the third person, but the pamphlet was never finished, and was not printed until several years after the author's death. A more celebrated literary fruit of captivity was *Alma*, and many shorter poems were doubtless composed in Brownlow Street. For the rest, he seems to have enjoyed a measure of liberty, which would increase as time went on. At first he was a target for Whig satirists, who lampooned him in such doggerel as the *Letters to Mr. Prior, discovering a Secret of Vast Importance, by a Fellow Sufferer*, a very poor imitation of the *Letters to Fleetwood Shephard*. But interest in his delinquencies died down, and by the end of 1716 he was at liberty,<sup>2</sup> though with three or four

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Moser in *Vestiges*, No. vii [*European Mag.* Jan., 1803, p. 9], quotes part of a song which he asserts was made by Prior in captivity and repeated by him to a relative of Moser's. It gives curious details of the poet's life in Brownlow Street, but has not a genuine ring and has never been incorporated with his poetry, though Mr. Brimley Johnson gave it in an appendix to the second Aldine edition. Moser's annotations, communicated to him "in very early life by some intimate friends of the poet," are, though trivial, not without interest if authentic.

<sup>2</sup> It seems impossible to discover exactly when Prior was set at liberty. Two years is generally stated to have been the extent of his confinement; but that is an exaggeration. He seems to have been free — though perhaps only lately so — when he wrote to Sir Thomas Hanmer, 11th October, 1716.

others he was specially excepted from the Act of Grace passed in the following May.

Although Prior was once more a free man, his public career was over. Halifax, his one friend among the Whigs, was dead, and he had nothing to hope from the new generation. Though not much over fifty, he must have felt, for a time at any rate, that he had lived too long. His depression and apathy found vent in a letter to Sir Thomas Hanmer, dated 10th November, 1716:—

“ 'Tis certain, dear Sir Thomas Hanmer, that civility, gratitude and even common sense should have obliged me much sooner to answer your very kind letter, but so it is that the variety of misfortunes under which I have lain, my despair of their being lessened, and a melancholy that I can't help indulging even to stupidity, have exempted me from living and acting like other men. I can amuse myself ten hours, but cannot take the pains to set down one idea, and can think of you a whole day without offering to tell you I do so in a letter that may be writ in a quarter of an hour: things do not make their usual impression on me; if Cloe weeps, she rather makes me angry than grieved: thus you see, sir, instead of thanking you for the most friendly invitation that was ever made, I entertain you with my spleen and ill humour: I think, however, that seeing you would diminish them, and shall endeavour what I can to that end as soon as I can have laid my very ill affairs in any sort of disposition, one part of which must be the selling my little house and effects here that I may be more like the philosopher with *omnia mea mecum porto*. You are in the right for staying in the country, sir, there is nobody here but the Dukes of Shrewsbury and Buckingham that you do as much as know, and I think nobody intends to come, for I do not hear that his Majesty's

return is expected till after Christmas : how the public scene will then open, no man can even guess : keep to your sheep and hounds and, without any reflection on other species of animals, esteem them very good company. In the meantime permit me to love you, and sometimes to drink your health with a friend or two." <sup>1</sup>

It was while Prior was drinking healths with his friends that a project for relieving his poverty was formed.

"Our friend Prior, not having had the vicissitude of human things before his eyes," wrote Erasmus Lewis<sup>2</sup> to Swift, "is likely to end his days in as forlorn a state as any other poet has done before him, if his friends do not take more care of him than he has done of himself. Therefore, to prevent the evil, which we see is coming on very fast, we have a project of printing his *Solomon*, and other poetical works, by subscription ; one guinea to be paid in hand, and the other at the delivery of the book. He, Arbuthnot, Pope, and Gay, are now with me, and remember you. It is our joint request, that you will endeavour to procure some subscriptions : you will give your receipts for the money you receive, and when you return it hither you shall have others in lieu. There are no papers printed here, nor any advertisement to be published ; for the whole matter is to be managed by friends in such a manner as shall be least shocking to the dignity of a plenipotentiary." <sup>3</sup>

Thus, in a very distinguished company, was inaugurated the scheme which resulted in the *editio princeps* of Prior's poems.<sup>4</sup> Swift responded generously to Lewis's

<sup>1</sup> Hanmer, *Correspondence*, p. 179.

<sup>2</sup> A Tory man of letters and diplomatist ; Oxford's secretary.

<sup>3</sup> Swift, *Correspondence* (ed. Ball), ii, 360.

<sup>4</sup> A second unauthorised collection (*A Second Collection of Poems on Several Occasions*. Price 1s.) was published in 1716. Prior disowned it in the *London Gazette*.

appeal, and canvassed Ireland for subscriptions with great vigour. Nevertheless, money flowed in but slowly at first, and Matt was in evil case.

In March Swift was again appealed to, and on 15th June Lewis wrote to him: "I desire you will be as quick as you can in the assistance you intend Prior; for those who subscribed here are impatient to have their books; and we cannot keep it off much longer, without passing for common cheats."<sup>1</sup> On the very same day the Earl of Chesterfield, father of the more famous letter-writer, wrote to Prior of "a trifle" which he had sent him, perhaps a subscription to the book, and consoled him for his present misfortunes with the reflection that "whatever may become of other mortals when they quit this gay stage of noise, folly, madness, nonsense and impertinence, you are sure (glow-worm-like) to shine in the dark by the bright poems you will leave behind you. *Dignum laude virum Musa vetat mori.*"<sup>2</sup>

A fortnight later, the Earl of Oxford, who had lain nearly two years in the Tower awaiting his trial for high treason, was acquitted untried and set at liberty. With this event we may connect the improvement in Prior's spirits which becomes noticeable about this time; though it was Oxford's son, Lord Harley, and not the earl himself, who was his last and most generous patron. In the preface to *Solomon* the poet mentions Lords Harley and Bathurst as the authors of the "amicable confederacy" to which the publication of his poems was due. It is more probable, however, as Lewis's first letter to Swift indicates, that the idea originated among his literary friends, and that the two noblemen gave their wealth and influence to the scheme when they saw it

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 389.

<sup>2</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 447.



foundering for lack of funds. Bathurst was one of the twelve peers created by Anne to secure a Tory majority. He was a considerable patron of letters, and used to call Prior his verseman and Lewis his proseman. In Matt's correspondence he figures as Batty.

At the end of July, Prior wrote to Swift from his house in Duke Street, which he had not, after all, been obliged to sell, a long letter which shows—among other significant indications—that the book was being taken up.

“ I have the favour of four letters from you, of the 9th, 13th, 16th, and 20th instant. They all came safe to me, however variously directed, but the last to me, at my house in Duke Street, is the rightest. I find myself equally comforted by your philosophy, and assisted by your friendship. You will easily imagine, that I have a hundred things to say to you, which for as many reasons I omit, and only touch upon that business, to which, in the pride of your heart, you give the epithet ‘ sorry.’ I return you the names of those who were kind enough to subscribe, that you may see if they are rightly spelt, as likewise the just titles put to them, as likewise if it has happened that any has subscribed for more than one volume. You will please to look over the catalogue, and return it to me at your leisure. You see that our calculation comes even ; the gentleman's name that desired it being omitted. I am sensible that this has given you too much trouble, but it is too late now to make an apology. Let Mr. Lewis, who is now with me, do it for me, at what time, and in what manner, he pleases.

“ I take it for granted, that whatever I write, as whatever is writ to me, will be broke open, so you will expect nothing from me, but what you may have as particularly from the *Postboy*. We are all pretty well in health.

I have my old whoreson cough, and I think I may call it mine for life. The earl is *semper idem*. Lord Harley is in the country. Our brotherhood is extremely dispersed ; but so as that we have been three or four times able to get as many of the Society together, and drink to our absent friends. I have been made to believe, that we may see your reverend person this summer in England ; if so, I shall be glad to meet you at any place, but when you come to London, do not go to the Cocoa-tree, as you sent your letter, but come immediately to Duke Street, where you shall find a bed, a book, and a candle ; so pray think of sojourning nowhere else.

"Pray give my service to all friends in general. I think, as you have ordered the matter, you have made the greater part of Ireland list themselves of that number. I do not know how you can recompense them, but by coming over to help me to correct the book which I promise them. You will pardon my having used another hand, since it is so much better than my own." <sup>1</sup>

A month later, writing from the Duke of Shrewsbury's seat at Heythrop, in Oxfordshire, Prior reiterated his wish that the Dean of St. Patrick's were in England, so that he might "a little look over the strange stuff that I am to give our friends for their money." <sup>2</sup>

By November he was busy with Jacob Tonson, his publisher. Humfrey Wanley, at this time Oxford's librarian, was called upon for expert advice. Prior wanted his book printed on vellum, but that was voted "impracticable, improbable, impossible," and he had to be content with "paper imperial, and the largest in England." The following spring saw him correcting proofs, "plagued with commas, semicolons, italic and

<sup>1</sup> Swift, *Correspondence*, ii, 398.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

capital," "to make nonsense more pompous, and furbelow bad poetry with good printing." "Besides contriving emblems, such as cupids, torches and harts for great letters, I am now unbinding two volumes of printed heads, to have them bound together in better order than they were before."<sup>1</sup> Two letters to Wanley, one of 5th April, the other of 11th April, 1718, illustrate the care taken by the poet to render the details of his book correct.

"I torment you before my appointed time, finding this sheet at home. As soon as you have looked it over it may be carried immediately to the printer. I will trouble you to-morrow morning for the sheet which you have. It is compliment in the most refined French dictionaries, but I submit it to you, as I ought with great reason to do everything concerning literature."<sup>2</sup>

"My good and kind Wanley, I send you these sheets as looked over first by Mr. Bedford and then by myself. I have made great letters at Ye, Me and emphatical words, that this may answer to the tenour of the other poems; but if in the old it be otherwise printed, or you please to alter anything, you know and may use your dictatorial power. In a book called the *Customs of London*, a folio printed, I think, in Henry the Eighth's time, which I gave our well beloved Lord Harley, you will find this poem. I hope I am to see you at dinner at Mr. Black's."<sup>3</sup>

Wanley himself was as anxious as Prior that a worthy volume should be produced, and grew "mighty angry with the printer about filthy hooks, meagre letters and

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, 8. For Prior as a designer, see above, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *Harleian MS.*, 3780, f. 342.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 344. The poem referred to is the *Nut Brown Maid*, which appears in the *Customs of London, or Arnold's Chronicle*, printed about 1521. Prior included the original poem in his volume for contrast with his own version of it, *Henry and Emma*.

unequal lines." At last, at the end of September, the poet passed the last sheet for press. The list of subscribers, however, had still to be printed; and on 5th January, 1719, he wrote to Wanley:—

"I must beg the continuance of your care in the names of the subscribers, as you have given it to me in the printing of the books. I send you my phiz. Pray give my service to Mrs. Wanley, desiring her to accept it, and assuring her that no man loves or esteems her husband and my friend more than yours, M. Prior." <sup>1</sup>

It is evident, therefore, that, although the title-page is dated 1718, the book was not published until the following year—at any rate, according to the new style of reckoning—though *Alma* and *Solomon*, presumably in printed sheets, were being circulated among the poet's friends considerably earlier. The Irish subscribers did not get their copies, which were bound in Dublin, until May; much to the annoyance of Swift, who called Tonson a blockhead for not sending the sheets sooner.

The primary object of the publication of *Poems on Several Occasions*—as this collection, like its predecessor, was called—was substantially fulfilled. The list of subscribers fills thirty-nine columns and includes the names of most of those who were celebrated in the social, political and literary life of the time. Swift, who took five copies, complained that he had got less than £200 out of the "hedge country," Ireland. But Prior reckoned the English subscribers at 1,800, an estimate which, allowing for those who took more than one copy, confirms the tradition that he made 4,000 guineas out of his two-guinea folio.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, f. 346.

This profitable book of verse has gained a reputation among bibliographers by reason of its size. Mr. Austin Dobson's characterisation of it has become almost classical. "With the small copy of 1718, Johnson might have knocked down Osborne the bookseller; with the same work in its tallest form (for there were three issues), Osborne the bookseller might have laid prostrate the 'Great Lexicographer' himself. It is, of a surety, one of the vastest volumes of verse in existence." The distinguished critic found that it measured 36 in. by 12, and weighed between 9 and 10 lbs. : a monstrous casket for jewels of which the lightest are now the most esteemed. The type is proportionately huge, but shapely and pleasant to the eye; and the vignettes drawn by Louis Chéron and the initials, which we suppose to be Prior's own, are admirably engraved. The book contained the poems already collected in 1709, with a number of additions. Most important, or most imposing, among the latter were *Alma* and *Solomon*; the first of which had been written to relieve the tedium of Prior's late imprisonment, while the second, though never before published, had been in existence, if not finished, as early as 1707.

\* \* \* \* \*

It would be superfluous to make a detailed examination of Prior's poetry. Literature which nobody wants to read is outside the legitimate sphere of criticism, and much that Prior wrote has passed irrevocably to the limbo of dead letters. Though he has found sympathetic editors in our own day, he will never regain the position which he held throughout the eighteenth century and lost when romance was re-born.

Confusing solemnity with seriousness and length with significance, Matt considered *Solomon* his most important work; an opinion which was echoed by William Cowper.

He was very angry when Pope expressed a preference for *Alma*; and the famous couplet in *The Conversation*,

Indeed, poor Solomon in rhyme  
Was much too grave to be sublime,

is placed on the lips not of the poet himself but of a busybody whose assumption of knowledge finally brings him to confusion. *Solomon* has positive merits. Prior manages the heroic couplet with much skill, giving it both variety and dignity. A page taken almost at random will prove that the author, if he misses the sublime, is equally guiltless of the ridiculous, and is capable of producing happy phrases at fairly frequent intervals. But to anyone in search of the finer flowers of English poetry, one would not recommend those too numerous pages in which the Wise King sounds the vanity of knowledge, pleasure and power.

The world has endorsed Pope's verdict that *Alma* is superior to *Solomon*, and the world no doubt is right. But there has been a tendency to overrate what the author justly called "a loose and hasty scribble to relieve the tedious hours of my imprisonment." Hudibrastics make easy reading, and Prior manages them well; but burlesque metaphysics are an acquired taste. It is true that the poem is not to be read for its theme—the growth of the soul, which in Matt's psychology enters at the feet and works upwards to the head—"but"—as Mr. Dobson so well says—"for its delightfully wayward digressions, its humour and its good-humour, its profusion of epigram and happy illustration." But those qualities are all to be found in a more compact and unalloyed form in many of the shorter poems. We can sympathise with Goldsmith's complaint that *Alma* is unintelligible, though we do not trace that fault to the subtlety of its philosophy. Matt, especially when writing

the octosyllabic couplet, is often obscure through sheer carelessness: he expresses a slipshod thought in slatternly English.

Of Prior's other long poem, *Henry and Emma*, there is nothing to be said. Its original, the *Nut Brown Maid*, is now allowed to be one of the jewels of our early literature, and this eighteenth century "improvement" is intolerable; unless to those who are such keen amateurs of the ludicrous as to find an adequate reward for much weariness in phrases like

That sprite, which does incessant haunt  
The lover's steps, the ancient maiden aunt.

The occasional poems have suffered the fate of all but the very best of such things. *The Ballad on the Taking of Namur* and, in a lesser degree, the *Letter to Boileau*, have kept their vitality, but the sober panegyrics are no longer to be digested. All that can be said for them is that they served their turn, and their author was unlucky in missing the laureate's crown. Both the salary and the tierce of canary would have been appreciated by him.<sup>1</sup>

The tales and fables are more debatable ground. They have received a good deal of praise, and their exclusion from modern anthologies is usually laid to their indecency. Dr. Johnson, it is true, considered this a false accusation; but that great man, as is universally admitted, was not at his best in his criticisms of Prior. A volume containing *Paulo Purganti*, *Hans Carvel* and *The Ladle* is not, whatever he may say, a "lady's book." These tales, however, are open to a graver charge than that of violating decorum. They are not amusing.

<sup>1</sup> Had it not been that Shadwell died too early (1692) and Tate just too late (1715), Prior would have stood a very good chance of appointment.

*Protogenes and Apelles*, on the other hand, to which no exception can be taken on grounds of taste or morality, is of higher literary merit. The story itself, which is derived from Pliny, is well told; but the value of the piece lies in the conversation between Apelles and Protogenes' "governante."

Does Squire Protogenes live here ?  
 Yes, sir, says she, with gracious air,  
 And court'sy low; but just called out  
 By lords peculiarly devout,  
 Who came on purpose, sir, to borrow  
 Our Venus, for the feast to-morrow;  
 To grace the church: 'tis Venus' day:  
 I hope, sir, you intend to stay,  
 To see our Venus: 'tis the piece  
 The most renowned throughout all Greece,  
 So like the original, they say:  
 But I have no great skill that way.  
 But, sir, at six ('tis now past three)  
 Dromo must make my master's tea:  
 At six, sir, if you please to come,  
 You'll find my master, sir, at home.

That passage is a very good example of the side of Prior which has most appeal for an age grown rather weary of conventional poetic diction and anxious to get back to the vernacular. Cowper noted the quality, and described it in an admirable way. "Every man conversant with verse-writing knows, and knows by painful experience, that the familiar style is of all styles the most difficult to succeed in. To make verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic, to marshal the words of it in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker, yet without meanness, harmoniously, elegantly and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake. He that could accomplish this task was



Prior; and many have imitated his excellence in this particular, but the best copies have fallen far short of the original." One of the best of Prior's poems in this kind is one which Cowper can never have read, the wonderful *Jinny the Just*, which was Mr. Waller's most pleasing discovery at Longleat, and is far superior to the kindred *Epitaph* on sauntering Jack and idle Joan. But these, like the jolly ballad of *Down Hall*, are realism pure and simple. Perhaps Prior's most delightful gift was the alliance of a natural, even conversational, style with the grace of light fantasy, as in the *Ode* ("The merchant to secure his treasure"), the *Answer to Cloe Jealous* ("Dear Cloe, how blubbered is that pretty face!"), and the *Secretary*, which has already been quoted. Those three pieces are inimitable; but scarcely inferior is *The Female Phaeton*, written to celebrate a youthful exploit of Lady Catherine Hyde, who became famous as the Duchess of Queensberry and, as "Prior's Kitty,"<sup>1</sup> was complimented by Horace Walpole in a witty epigram so late as 1771. *A Lover's Anger*, though not quite so spontaneous, is also worthy of mention in this company. To these, the flower of Prior's verse, must be added his child-poems: *To a Child of Quality*,<sup>2</sup> which Swinburne,

<sup>1</sup> See Austin Dobson, *Eighteenth Century Vignettes* (first series). There is, however, some doubt as to Prior's authorship of this poem. See Waller in *Dialogues of the Dead*, 387.

<sup>2</sup> The identity of the Child of Quality was long unknown. A copy of the poem at Longleat, however, mentioned by Mr. Waller, states that she was Lady Mary Villiers, daughter of Prior's friend, the Earl of Jersey. This proves that the poem was either written before 1704 (the date it bears), or was retrospective; for Lady Mary was married to her first husband, Thomas Thynne, in 1710. On 3rd October, 1700, Prior writing from London to Jersey at Loo, says: "Lady Mary, you see, writes very well, and is a very good child"; to which Jersey replied: "I find you know my weakness, or else you would never have sent me Miss Mary's writing, though I must own it is very pretty for her age. I hope you do more for her at Knoles, where she wants your kindness more"—perhaps a reflection on Lady Jersey. Lady Mary

so great a master in the kind, generously called "the most adorable of nursery idylls that ever was or will be in our language," and the *Letter*, which is not only charming, but really beautiful, beginning "My noble, lovely, little Peggy."

Rather more artificial than the poems last mentioned, but still to be ranked with them, is the pastoral dialogue (imitated from Ovid) between *Daphne and Apollo*, which, though not printed till after the poet's death, seemed to Pope to be one of his best pieces.<sup>1</sup> A very noticeable merit of this poem is that, while the god talks in a becomingly heroic strain, the nymph answers him, with delicious impertinence, in the language of everyday. Indeed, she reminds one of Congreve's "Millament" in a somewhat similar position; than which no higher compliment could be paid either to her or to her author.

Such poems as *Daphne and Apollo* serve as a transition from the delicately-familiar to the artificial. How far artificiality—to use this word in its restricted sense—is tolerable in poetry depends mainly on the length of the poem and the gravity of the subject. The ponderous pindaric, the elaborate pastoral, weary us, but the epigram and the polished *bergerette* are among the minor joys of literature. Prior's epigrams vary much in quality. Some of them are very good, others pointless and vulgar. In the art of the *bergerette* he was an adept. Among the "Twenty Four Songs" (also posthumous) which were set

married as her second husband Lord Lansdowne of Biddeford, "Granville the polite," who had written a poem to her before her first marriage.

<sup>1</sup> Prior was a bad critic of his own verse. While careful to collect all his pompous odes, he omitted from *Poems on Several Occasions*, *The Secretary*, *Daphne and Apollo*, and *To a Child of Quality*. *My Noble, Lovely, Little Peggy*, *Down Hall*, and perhaps *The Female Phaeton*, and *Jinny the Just* were written too late for inclusion in the folio; but it is curious that Matt withheld as good as, or better than, he gave to his subscribers.

to music by various hands, besides elsewhere in his work, are to be found polite, though not always proper, little pieces, which are the quintessence of artifice, the lyric equivalent of *The Rape of the Lock*. Their ultimate originals, of course, were the *Odes* of Horace, but their similarity to the contemporary minor poetry of France is more obvious, and was noted by Johnson. The debt was probably all on Prior's side. He was liked in France as a poet as well as personally, and won the praises of Voltaire, but when French poets began to borrow from English they sought qualities very different from his.<sup>1</sup>

His pretty songs to Phyllis and Chloe and Nanette also look backwards to the seventeenth century, and recall the work of those brilliant Court poets whom in his boyhood he had served with wine ; but they lack that touch of magic, the very spirit of poetry, which is not infrequent in Rochester and Sedley, and even appears in one notable effort of Mrs. Aphra Behn. Prior, indeed, though from a century which produced Herrick and Marvell, not to mention Milton, he must needs select Cowley and Waller for his influences, may, as has been already noted, be considered the last poet of that great era. Some early poems, first published by Mr. Waller, emphasise this aspect of his genius ; e.g., for instance, *To a Lady Sleeping* :—

Still sleep, still fold those lovely arms,  
 Still be free from noise and harms,  
 Whilst all the gods of Love defend thee  
 (The gods of Love which still attend thee)  
 Whilst around in humble state  
 A thousand wanton angels wait,  
 Whilst gods officiously find  
 Pleasing dreams to charm thy mind,  
 Dreams of things (if such there are)  
 Like yourself serene and fair,

<sup>1</sup> The Abbé Prévost placed Prior among the five principal English poets, the other four being Milton, Spenser, Addison and Thomson.

And when you open those bright eyes,  
 When Morpheus with the well-clothed vision flies,  
 May you that happiness renew  
 And all the pleasures of your dream prove true.

Again, *To the Earl of Dorset on the Birth of his Son* is in the convention of Dryden rather than that of the Augustans ; while in one passage, it may be noted by the way, a later and greater ode is anticipated.

But oh ! what clouds of glory, clouds of light,  
 Too strong for feeble man's external eye,  
 Roll round the noble babe, and mock my drowned sight.

But, when all is said, Prior was not most himself when remembering his predecessors. The gift which won him fame was his topicality—his power of putting a contemporary idea or event into verse which was entirely up to date ; and though he can no longer interest us, or increase our interest, in William III and Marlborough, he can interest us in the temper and predicaments of Chloe, in the children of his fashionable friends, and in his own feelings towards Sir Fleetwood Shephard or Mr. John Morley of Halstead. His outstanding merie was vivacity, which superficially is an excellent substitute for vitality. Prior had the vivacity of the consumptive, together with his eroticism and his cynicism. All those qualities appear constantly in his verse. He was convinced by temperament that all is vanity, but fortunately he was not often tempted to moralise on his text ; he usually added the one bearable corollary : *Carpe diem*. With Swift he cried *Vive la bagatelle !* which, if not an inspiring watchword, spared us a succession of *Solomons* and gave us instead a score of charming lyrics.

The question of Prior's prosody has been treated in detail by Professor Saintsbury, who has shown that the poet has considerable significance as a metrist.<sup>1</sup> His

<sup>1</sup> *History of English Prosody*, ii, 423-435.

prose is always pleasant, but not remarkable. In that medium, as in verse, he wrote best in the familiar style ; and his letters, for manner as well as for matter, are more readable than his essays on learning and on opinion. His status as prose-writer, however, which before rested on his prefaces, the *Examiner* article, and the dedication to Dorset, has been raised by the publication of those essays and the four *Dialogues of the Dead*. All these works were known to Pope, but it remained for Mr. Waller to give them to the world. The *Dialogues*, which are between Charles V and Clenard, Locke and Montaigne, the Vicar of Bray and Sir Thomas More, and Oliver Cromwell and his Porter, are the work of a man who was witty and widely read, and had an eye for contrasts of character. Prior intended to add to their number, and the subjects he had in mind—Ximenes and Wolsey, Wolsey and Cranmer, Luther and Loyola—suggest an interest in doctrinal questions which would not be suspected from the nature of his most familiar work. We confess, however, that the dialogue we most regret is that between Jane Shore and the wife of Edward IV.

At the time of his death, Prior, according to his epitaph, was engaged on a history of the events in which he had taken part. Pope was very scornful of the older poet's capacity for such a task. He was possibly right ; for though Matt was a keen observer and something of a student of history, he was not built for big undertakings. At any rate, the book issued in 1740 as Volume I of his collected works, under the title of *The History of his Own Time*, was certainly not, as it professed to be, " revised and signed by himself." Perhaps, however, it does not quite deserve the contempt which its unfounded claims to authority have brought upon it. The parts supplied by the compiler, one Bancks, are inaccurate as regards

Prior's early life and superfluous as regards public events. The letters it contains are more conveniently accessible elsewhere. But it preserved Matt's account of his examination before the Secret Committee, his unfinished answer to the committee's report, and his diary—a bare record of letters received and visits paid—during part of his last residence in Paris.

In an age when anonymous publication was the rule rather than the exception, and literary piracy was easy, a popular author was very liable to be credited with what he never wrote. A good deal has been attributed to Prior which certainly or probably did not come from his pen. Mr. Waller, when preparing the edition of Matt's works so often referred to, went thoroughly into this question of doubtful attributions, and his judgment as to what is genuine and what is spurious need not be questioned. The matter is not one to labour; for, setting aside the logical, though none the less inhuman, doctrine that the authorship of a work of art is of no importance, none of the uncertain Prior poems are worth much attention.<sup>1</sup> Nor have his Latin verses any interest save as rather unnecessary evidence that the fellow of St. John's was capable of composing them.

<sup>1</sup> One addition might be made, however, to Mr. Waller's list of doubtful pieces; a thin quarto entitled *Two Tales*, published in 1722. The first of these two poems, *An Impossible Thing*, sounds very like Prior; the second, *The Peasant in Search of his Heifer*, might also easily be his. Mr. T. J. Wise has a copy of this publication, but he acquired it after the appearance of the Cambridge edition; so that Mr. Waller may not have seen it.

## CHAPTER XII

### LAST YEARS

WHEN Prior regained his liberty, he had something less than five years yet to live. He was over fifty, though he hated to be reminded of the fact ; and a strenuous career, not guiltless of excesses, acting on his weak body, must have made him more aged than his years. Deafness, besides, was now added to his trouble.<sup>1</sup> These latter days were only eventful in a very minor sense. A marked man, with no friends in influential places—one whose correspondence was opened by the authorities—he had little chance of getting back into public life.

He did, indeed, make another effort to enter Parliament. In November, 1717, he went to Cambridge to vote for the anti-Bentleyan candidate for the vice-chancellorship, Gooch, who won his election by 122 votes to 60. In April, 1719, he received a letter from Dr. Jenkin, master of St. John's College, asking whether in the event of the death of Dr. Pasch, one of the members for the University, who was ill, he would offer himself as candidate. Lord Harley had been invited, but had refused. Jenkin was sure Prior would be acceptable : his

<sup>1</sup> " I have only seen Brown, the surgeon, to whom I have made an *auricular confession*, and from him have received *extreme unction*, and applied it, which may soften the obduracy of my ear, and make it capable of receiving the impression of ten thousand lies which will be poured into it as soon as I shall take my seat at the Smyrna, or walk in the Court of Requests as other gentlemen do " [to Lord Harley, 26 Nov., 1719 : *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 472]. " I hope well from my surgeon Brown, who begins to think that my *acroamatica* were impeded by cereal, congregated, cold particles ; that is, in a more vulgar style, that I hear much better since he has poured oil into my ears." [To the same, two days later : *ibid.*, 473] : " I did not take care of my ears, till I knew if my head was my own or not," Prior told Swift.

only fear was lest his being excepted from the Act of Grace should disable him from sitting in the House. This objection was disposed of in a long letter from Prior : he believed that what merit he had with the University was founded on his sufferings ; he understood that a new Act of Indemnity was shortly to be passed, to include those excepted in the former Act ; Lords Oxford and Harcourt exercised their rights in the House of Lords, as though under no disability ; more than one corporation was waiting for an opportunity to elect Thomas Harley ; and Prior himself had been urged by many members of the House of Commons to seek the means of joining them. In September, 1720, Pasch died, and Matt wrote to the Vice-Chancellor offering his services. On arriving at Cambridge, however, he found the Whig element strong and the authorities unfriendly ; and when the Chancellor wrote to Dr. Gooch that his election would be to the prejudice of the University, Prior gave up the idea of standing. " When I came to the field of battle," he told Lord Chesterfield, " I found the University of meaner sentiments than any I could close with. The proposal was but grimace, and the old bucks cunningly pushed off the down deer. So I laid down the thoughts of representing a body of men who were a little afraid lest their interest sustained in Parliament might spoil their preferments at Courts, and left the noise of a divided University to follow my studies in the country." He seems to have abandoned the contest with little sense of disappointment. The only lasting result of his latter-day connection with his University was the *Verses spoken to Lady Henrietta Cavendish Holles Harley in the Library of St. John's College, Cambridge, November the 9th. An. 1719.*

To letters and friendship, to building and horticulture,



he now gave most of his attention. Dick Shelton and Adrian Drift were his constant companions. Literature and its makers took a larger place in his life than perhaps they had ever done before. Unlike Swift, he was never friendly with those from whom he differed in politics ; and refused even to acknowledge the literary merit of Addison or Steele. But he probably saw a good deal of Pope and Gay, Arbuthnot and Lewis ; and he was in frequent correspondence with the great man in Ireland, whom he can never have met after he went to France in 1712. Followers of the other arts, such as James Gibbs, the architect, Michael Dahl and John Wotton, the painters, were also among his acquaintances.

Several of his own best poems were written at this time, and his fame was at its highest. It may have been now that he shared with Pope and Addison the distinction of being what the modern book trade calls a " best seller." <sup>1</sup> He was held in great respect by the lesser fry of literature. Such forgotten worthies as Richardson Pack would send him " a handful of daisies in return for your garland of myrtle and roses," accompanying his present with a comparison between the poet and the courtesan which anticipated Stevenson. Charles Gildon, one of those hacks who owe to the *Dunciad* whatever place they hold in the memory of their posterity, sent him a tragedy which he asked him to recommend to the Harley's, though he himself displayed no incapacity for pointing out its merits. It is possible that Matt, the much patronised, rather enjoyed playing the patron. He subscribed two guineas to one of John Dennis's publications ; gave a certain Sam Briscoe, who was in want, five for a set of the works of Tom Brown, the satirist, and made a collection to pay the debts of " one

<sup>1</sup> Spence, *Anecdotes*, 258.

Mr. Jacups, a new author," who was presumably Giles Jacob, author of *Lives of the Poets*, including Prior's.<sup>1</sup> But he reserved to himself the right of denying these importunate poets. Gildon, for instance, had already waited an anxious week for news of the tragedy which he had sent to Duke Street, before he wrote the letter cited above. It is to be presumed, however, that he got a reply; for a little later he sent three books to Lord Harley's: one for his lordship; one for Lady Harley; and one for the distinguished poet, their friend. A fortnight passed, and having received no acknowledgment of this gift, he wrote a letter of mild protest, in which, after referring to Prior's generosity to Briscoe and "Mr. Jacups," he suggested that Harley should be persuaded to relieve his poverty. Even this appeal provoked no response; and after another week, Gildon, who was "in years, blind and lame, and of a very infirm health," sent Matt an epistle, which is a remarkable example of the vanity, ill-temper and utter lack of self-respect of these Augustan poetasters.

"I understand that you and my Lord's family are all moving out of town next Saturday. I am the more surprised because I have not had one line from you about the present I sent you, or my subsequent letter to you, which is a treatment that I have not met with from anyone but Mr. Prior; for though I have written to the greatest men in England, both ecclesiastical and temporal, yet not one of them ever thought me unworthy of a civil answer, but I suppose that it is not Mr. Prior's way. As a gentleman, as I may say I am both by birth and education, and I think without much vanity I may say

<sup>1</sup> Jacob dedicated a volume of poems to Prior, whom he also did his best to draw into a quarrel between himself and the crusty John Dennis. But the great man treated these pigmy disputants with disarming suavity.

a scholar, I thought I had a right to an answer from another gentleman, but it seems I was mistaken, which confirms the opinion of a very intimate friend of mine, who told me that I had so long locked myself up from the world that I had forgot the world. And yet I hope that my mistaking Mr. Prior will not be a very strong proof of his assertion, because upon my sending one of my books to one of the greatest persons in England, he not only sent me twenty guineas, but likewise ordered his chaplain to send me a very obliging answer.

“ I have much more to say to you upon this head, but shall defer till you return to town. I shall trouble you with no more at present.”<sup>1</sup>

Prior was spared the weariness threatened in the last paragraph ; for he never saw London again.

The rebuke which Matt received from Hugh Stanhope was better merited than Gildon's. Stanhope had called to ask him for a subscription towards a life of the late Earl Stanhope, and Prior had answered that he wished he would write a life that would recompense his pains and gain him more credit. “ This, sir,” wrote Stanhope on the following day, “ may pass with some people for a kind expression, but to me it carries the air of a French compliment. Can any man expect to gain more credit and advantage than from writing the life of one who was universally known for his uncorrupt loyalty and fidelity to his king, his untainted zeal for the real good and welfare of his country, and his known abhorrence of bribery and corruption ? And that the Earl Stanhope was such, is what his very enemies acknowledge. I am very sensible that to write the life of one of those unhappy lords, who justly forfeited their heads for being concerned in the late rebellion, would be very

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 507.

agreeable to the taste of many, and meet with great encouragement, especially from those who were employed by some of the late Ministry to pave a way for bringing in the Pretender. I beg leave to observe that to reflect on a person deceased, though obliquely, is very unbecoming the character of a gentleman; and they who now cast aspersions on the Earl Stanhope, would not dare to say half so much to his face, had he been living." <sup>1</sup> This was severe, but Prior had brought it on himself. Lord Stanhope, it is true, had been a member of the Secret Committee which had treated Matt so unpleasantly; but it was not to be denied that he had other claims to remembrance.

Not the least distinguished of the poet's later literary correspondents was Mrs. Manley. Her new play, which had been designed to delight the town in the season of 1720, had, by the "wise management" of the Lord Chamberlain, been postponed, and her *Lucius* was to be revived in its stead. Mrs. Oldfield had consented to speak the epilogue which Prior had written for the original production of that play; and she was anxious to be rehearsed in it by the author himself. It would be interesting to know whether Matt obliged the great actress. He had certainly rehearsed one of his prologues a few weeks before, in circumstances which constitute a notable achievement. One morning he had received the following note—

"SIR,

"I have sent inclosed a scrawl of a prologue huddled up in a hurry. I beg of you to fit it up to our purpose, or (what would be much more acceptable) one of your own. Pray let to-morrow morning be the latest, but if

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

you could possibly send this night you would very much oblige,

“ Sir,

“ Your humble and obliged servant,

“ *Monday morning.*

“ *ERSKINE.*”

The endorsement speaks for itself. Erskine's effort was evidently not up to the mark.

“ This letter was written to Matthew Prior, Esqr., this first day of February, A.D. 17 $\frac{1}{2}$  $\frac{9}{10}$ .

“ *N.B.* Mr. Prior (in pursuance of Lord Erskine's request) made a new prologue, as desired ; and caused the same to be transcribed ; and (which is more) saw the same rehearsed, in perfection, by the Lord Dupplin, this very morning.” <sup>1</sup>

The occasion of this quick piece of work was the performance, by some Westminster boys, of Otway's *Orphan*, which was to take place on the following day at Hickford's Dining Room. Lord Dupplin, who spoke Prior's prologue, and also played the part of Cordelio, was Lord Oxford's grandson, the “ little Tommie Haye,” who had the smallpox in 1718. He was now aged 10, and evidently building that reputation for scholarship which he later enjoyed. Prior wrote several prologues, and among his unpublished papers are fragments of various tragedies in blank-verse, which were never brought anywhere near completion. His genius was totally unsuited to tragedy, but it is a pity he never tried his hand at prose comedy. If he had not it in him to equal Congreve, he might at any rate have rivalled Farquhar.

But to return from conjectures to facts, it may certainly be accounted one that Prior preferred the polite atmosphere of *dilettantism* to the odour of Grub

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxix, f. 4. The prologue, which is short, was first published in the *New Collection of Poems*, 1725.

Street which clung to the notepaper of Dennis and Gildon. Swift was not a *dilettante*, but he had become a dean since Matt last saw him, and had ceased for the time from pamphleteering. Chesterfield's letters were typical of the amateur, and prove that the fourth earl's epistolary tendencies were inherited. Lord Bathurst and John Sheffield, Duke of Buckingham, come under the same category, though the latter's *Essays on Poetry* and *Satire*, if hardly read as poetry, are still documents in the history of criticism.<sup>1</sup>

In connection with this nobleman—commonly called John of Bucks—may be mentioned Prior's dealings with the Jacobite Bishop of Rochester. Francis Atterbury and the poet were at Westminster School together, but they do not seem to have seen much of one another in after years, though they must have met in the days of the *Examiner*. After Matt's imprisonment, however, they became for a time on excellent terms. Atterbury read *Solomon* and *Alma* before their publication, and was duly complimentary. Prior recommended his godson, Mr. Clough, for the vicarage of Dartford, and though the bishop refused to make the appointment, he did it so graciously that his friend could not be, and was not, offended. They cracked classical jokes together (as gentlemen should), and Atterbury ended a letter: "To-day, to-morrow, always; at Bromley, at Westminster, everywhere; in Greek, in Latin, in English; and which is more, in good earnest, I am your faithful servant." One would have thought that this was a sufficiently comprehensive vow to have lasted for three years. But it was not. Matt must needs grow satirical and concoct epigrams at the bishop's expense. The first,

<sup>1</sup> He was one of the victims of those "nipping turns," on account of which Prior disowned his *Satire on Modern Translators*.

written in the form of a mock epitaph, which reflected on Atterbury's litigiousness, did no harm; the victim entered into the joke. He did not find Prior's second effort so palatable. The Duke of Buckingham, dying in February, 1721, left an epitaph for himself which was supposed to be a confession of infidelity. Nevertheless, Franco (as Prior, with his love for diminutives and nicknames, called Atterbury), being Dean of Westminster as well as Bishop of Rochester, allowed him to be buried in the Abbey with the offending inscription, slightly modified, on his tomb. This step evoked a good deal of criticism, and Matt wrote what is one of his most successful epigrams:—

"I have no hopes," the duke he says, and dies;  
"In sure and certain hopes," the prelate cries:  
Of these two learned peers, I prithee, say, man,  
Who is the lying knave, the priest or layman?  
The duke he stands an infidel confessed,  
"He's our dear brother," quoth the lordly priest,  
The duke, though knave, still "brother dear," he cries;  
And who can say the reverend prelate lies?

The poet has let his wit run away with his good nature, and can hardly have hoped, in the circumstances, that his gibe would not be resented. The breach lasted until his own death, scarcely more than six months later, though Atterbury was only prevented by illness from attending his funeral, having wished to make that public sign of forgiveness.

After the release of Oxford and Prior, the Brothers Club met once more, but with Swift and Bolingbroke away it can have had little of its original character left. Ladies were admitted to membership, the Duchess of Ormonde, Lady Harley and Lady Dupplin being Sisters. The meetings, indeed, must have been to a large extent Harley family parties.

Of that family Prior himself had become practically a member. Swift was perhaps thinking rather of public office than of private charity when he wrote to Lord Harley: "I believe he is the first person in any Christian country that ever was suffered to starve after having been in so many great employments";<sup>1</sup> and when Prior complained to Swift (as Swift did to Prior) that Oxford, since his retirement, had forgotten his friends, he meant to charge the earl with nothing worse than being a bad correspondent. But when, after Matt's death, the dean told Bolingbroke that their old friend had passed his latter days in poverty, and Bolingbroke took the occasion to sneer at Lord Harley, those two eminent men were guilty either of ignorance or of injustice.

Harley's arrangement with the poet was, it is true, strictly businesslike. In consideration of the sum of £3,000—what was left, probably, after the payment of debts, of the 4,000 guineas brought by the *Poems*—he was to allow Matt an annuity of £300. In view of the short time the annuitant had to live, it would appear at first sight that his Lordship made a good bargain. But this arrangement was far from being the sum of his generosity. Prior was as often as not his guest, either at Wimpole or in Dover Street; he was the constant recipient of gifts in kind, for which he did not fail to beg; and it seems that his receipts in money were not confined to the annuity.<sup>2</sup> Lastly, Harley purchased him the estate of Down Hall, of which more immediately.

The reason why it fell to Harley, and not Oxford, to help Prior, who was nearly twice his age, is probably to be found in the fact that the son was a richer man than

<sup>1</sup> *Welbeck MSS.*, v, 561.

<sup>2</sup> There exists not only a receipt for the annuity dated 1st May, 1721, but also receipts for two sums of £100, dated 17th July and 27th July of the same year. [Prior Papers (Longleat), xxix, ff. 5, 6.]



the father. He had married an heiress, Lady Henrietta Cavendish Holles, only child of John Holles, Duke of Newcastle, and had thus become possessed of the great properties of Welbeck and the rest, which eventually passed, with *his* heiress, to the Duke of Portland. Another reason, perhaps, was the ex-Treasurer's laziness, which, if it did not make him forget his friends, at any rate made him a dilatory and unreliable benefactor. Oxford, at any rate, partly perhaps in gratitude for Matt's discretion before the Secret Committee, was devoted to Prior. He was even embarrassing in his hospitality : as an illustration of which there is an amusing passage in a letter from the poet to Lord Harley : " When you left London I well hoped I might retire to my own cell, but human expectations are vain, and I find myself only removed from Dover Street to Lincoln's Inn Fields [the earl's London home], where a letter may surer find me than in Duke Street, Westminster. I will reserve the particulars of that scene till I have the honour of seeing you ; imagine, however, a little of it by way of diary.—Monday. My Lord comes to see the Dups ; <sup>1</sup> rap, rap, a footman at the door ; my Lord will call Mr. Prior presently, for he must dine with him as he promised ; when or where that promise made, *nusquam constat*. ' Then you dine with me to-morrow,' —Tuesday—' for there is company that you ought to see, and Wednesday, for I dine alone.' ' Thursday,' says Lady Dupplin in a soft voice, ' we dine with my father, and he will take it very ill if you don't come, for he ordered me to invite you in great form.' And before the dinner is half digested, at that memorable moment when the toasted cheese appears, ' Prior, you

<sup>1</sup> Lady Dupplin was Oxford's daughter. She and her husband apparently lived near Prior in Westminster.

dine with me to-morrow, for we must go to Richardson's <sup>1</sup> before dinner. I'll call you at one, pray be ready.'—Friday. That 'one' is three. 'It is too late to go to Richardson's, but to-morrow we will go, and pray don't engage yourself, now I have given you fair warning.' I could continue my journal, but you may guess that one week is not unlike another. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Other instances of such importunity might be cited; and when Caesar and Calphurnia—Lord and Lady Oxford—had lured the poet to Bedington, their house in Hertfordshire, he found it very difficult to get away again.

On the whole, nevertheless, he saw more of the younger generation. In 1719, for instance, he spent four months at Wimpole, Harley's Cambridgeshire seat, where he found the library a sort of earthly paradise. Edward, Lord Harley, afterwards second Earl of Oxford, was, like his father, a great collector of books; and, though his culture did not keep pace with his accumulation, and he hardly deserved Prior's epigram—

Fame counting thy books, my dear Harley, shall tell,  
No man had so many who knew them so well,

still, many generations of students have called him blessed; the first of whom, perhaps, was Matt Prior. And if the husband was *amabilis*, the wife was *adoranda*. The poet was never tired of singing the praises of Lady Harley.

With the whole clan, indeed, who called the Earl of Oxford their chief, he was on excellent terms; but it is his dealings with a very small, though a very important, member that are worthiest of record. Matt had always been fond of children. To Dorset's son and Jersey's daughter he had repaid some of the kindness which their

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Richardson, who painted Prior's portrait about this time.

<sup>2</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, ii, 453.

fathers had shown himself. And now in his leisure he fell captive—with “a very pure and innocent passion”—to the charms of Lady Margaret Cavendish Holles Harley, his last patron’s juvenile heiress; known in the language of his affection as “little Margaretta,” “Peggy,” “little mistress Peggy,” “little Pearl,” “her Peggiety,” “*la petite ange*,” “little incomparable Lady,” and what not. There is scarcely a letter to the father in which the daughter is not mentioned; while on 29th March, 1720, being then at Wimpole—the date and place of such an event are better worth remembering than many which figure in the calendars—he wrote that incomparable letter which stands alone among his verse.

My noble, lovely, little Peggy,  
Let this my first epistle beg ye  
At dawn of morn and close of even  
To lift your heart and hands to Heaven.  
In double beauty say your prayer,  
Our Father first, and then *notre Père*,  
And, dearest child, along the day,  
In everything you do or say  
Obey and please my Lord and Lady,  
So God shall love, and angels aid ye.

If to these precepts you attend,  
No second letter need I send:  
And so I rest your constant friend.

“And now I come to the best part of my letter,” he wrote from Westminster on one occasion to Harley in the country, “which is that I paid my little Lady a visit to-day; she is in admirable health and humour, and desires her duty may be remembered to Papa and Mamma.” At another time he sends Lady Harley eight pigeons (“the first tribute which I have received from Down”), but adds conditions as to their disposal. “My will and pleasure is that two of them may be roasted immediately for my dear little Lady’s

private table, the other six for your Ladyship's dinner to-morrow, to be neatly accomodated and encrusted with sweetbreads and 'sparragrass' according to the discretion of your cook." While he was in the library at Wimpole, hammering out the couplet on Harley and his books already quoted, Peggy was with him, and the next morning he was enraptured to hear her lisping his lines "with the prettiest tone and manner imaginable." In the last letter he wrote—endorsed as such by Drift—he said to Oxford: "I return your Lordship my humblest thanks for having mentioned me to your dear and beautiful correspondent Peggy: I never saw an angel, though I have read much of them, but I fancy she is very like one. She has no wings, indeed, but she has legs that carry her so lightly that it is a question if she flies or no." It is not surprising if, in after years, Peggy had pleasant recollections of the poet, as one who "made himself beloved by every living thing in the house—master, child, and servant, human creature or animal."

Writing verses and letters, browsing among Harley's books or his own, dining in Dover Street or Lincoln's Inn Fields, entertaining select parties at his own "palace" in Duke Street<sup>1</sup> with Madeira and his celebrated puns (of which he once perpetrated a hundred in forty-eight hours), the retired diplomat passed his time in a very placid and uneventful manner. His relations with Cambridge caused him a momentary irritation, and he lost

<sup>1</sup> For instance: "I invited the *virtuosi* t'other day, Gibbs, Wanley, Wooten and Christian; the two first could not come, and the two last could not be got away till midnight; dirty Dibben of Dorsetshire and the Archdeacon of Bath were of the company, as well to bless the meat as to drink great share of the claret; Morley assisted in tea. It was a conversation about five o'clock, a disputation towards seven, and a bear-garden about ten. We drank your healths over and over, as well in our civil as bacchanalian hours." [*Longleat MSS.*, iii, 482.]

a little money when the South Sea Bubble burst, but not enough seriously to trouble his contentment. He would have vegetated altogether had it not been for Down Hall.

That house was the real passion of his last days. It stood, and still stands, in Essex, not far from Harlow, and was bought by Lord Harley for the sum of 4,000 guineas and given to his friend for life, with reversion to himself. The transaction was effected by a certain John Morley of Halstead, who was Harley's agent, and was reputed to have negotiated his marriage with the Holles heiress.<sup>1</sup>

In the ballad of *Down Hall*—written "To the Tune of King John and the Abbot of Canterbury"—Matt has described his first visit to his country seat. He and Morley drove in a chariot, while his Swedish servant Oeman rode beside them on Prior's horse Ralpho; as they are shown in the engraving by Vandergucht which originally illustrated the poem. They put up at the Bull Inn at Hoddesdon—the occasion of an amusing conversation between Morley and the landlady, which lost nothing in the poet's telling—and next morning set out to find Down Hall. But when they came to it, the prospective owner was disappointed. Morley had told him that—

There are gardens so stately and arbours so thick,  
A portal of stone and a fabric of brick.

What he saw was "a low ruined white shed," "untiled and unglazed." He expressed his belief that it was a barn. Morley maintained that it was—

a house for a squire,  
A justice of peace, or a knight of the shire.

<sup>1</sup> See *Essex Review*, xi, 145, 193, "John Morley of Halstead," from materials supplied by the Rev. T. G. Gibbons. Morley was an ancestor of Lord Kitchener of Khartoum.

Matt replied that "a house should be built or with brick or with stone." This place was only lath and plaster. The house was Matt's concern, Morley retorted, "My business is land." "I showed you Down Hall; did you look for Versailles?" he asked sarcastically.

And now, Sir, a word to the wise is enough;  
You'll make very little of all your old stuff;  
And to build at your age, by my troth, you grow simple,  
Are you young and rich, like the master of Wimple?

If you have these whims of apartments and gardens,  
For twice fifty acres you'll ne'er see five farthings:  
And in yours I shall find the true gentleman's fate:  
E'er you finish your house you'll have spent your estate.

The bargain was at length concluded, but Prior had conceived a lasting suspicion of Morley, to which, in jest, he often gave vent in his letters to Harley. "Squire Morley is in health, I hope, and by travel and experience knows a strong brick house from one built with rotten loam." "I intend to issue out a general pardon to all who have injured me, except Morley," is obviously reminiscent of his own exception from the Act of Grace.<sup>1</sup>

Whatever its shortcomings, Matt found his new possession of absorbing interest, which was enhanced rather than diminished by the fact that there was so much to be done in the way of improvement. Throughout the summer of 1720 he was busy with his plans.

<sup>1</sup> Prior had sometimes stayed with Morley at Halstead, and at the agent's instigation had written the lines *Engraven on a Column in the Church of Halstead in Essex, the Spire of which, burnt down by Lightning, was rebuilt at the expense of Mr. Samuel Fiske, 1717.* - This poem, not much longer than its title, appears in *Poems on Several Occasions*. Fiske was a friend of Morley's. "Morley was with me this morning, madder than ever about Fiske the apothecary and his copper-plate," wrote Matt to Harley, 30th November, 1717. "Tonson and Drift have a little appeased him, and we shall have a plate as big as has been formed since the days of Alexander the Coppersmith. Will that do?" [*Longleat MSS.*, iii. 450.] The copper-plate was presumably for Prior's lines.

"I have been at Down," he wrote to Harley, "surveyed the estate, and done everything—as to taking a rent-roll, discoursing my tenant, etc.—that Morley calls wisdom. It is impossible to tell you how beautiful a situation Down is, and how fine the wood may be made; but for the house, as all the cross unmathematical devils upon earth first put it together, all the thought and contrivance of man cannot make a window to be looked out of, or a door to be shut, in case it were made otherwise habitable: so sooner or later I foresee *destruit domum*; but of this, as the divines say, at another opportunity. . . ." <sup>1</sup>

"As to Down, it is really fine; to make it habitable will be the question. *Deus providebit*, to which I shall add all human means by commensuration, hortification and edification, but nothing more than projection upon paper till I shall have seen you, which I very much desire to do." <sup>2</sup> Matt had no mind to heed the agent's warning against building. Though he asked his friends' advice, in the main he followed his own will; nor is he to be blamed, if they were all like the one who "exclaims against me for thinking of building anything at Down, and then talks of a saloon of thirty feet upon thirty, and an ante-chamber and bedchamber." James Gibbs, the architect, was commissioned to make plans, which may still be seen in his *Book of Architecture*, published in 1728.

Prior took a special interest in his garden. He had always, apparently, had a taste for horticulture, and Halifax, after the reconciliation, had written to him as to an expert on the subject. But now, for the first time in his life, he had a piece of ground of his own. "We have laid out squares, rounds and diagonals, and planted

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 483.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 484.

quincunxes at Down. *Chacun a sa marotte*, and that farm will turn my brain." He employed a *virtuoso grand jardinier*, otherwise known as *operator hortorum et sylvarum*, sunk a well, and projected a fish pond to hold ten carp. The following note, which is in the poet's writing, indicates the nature of his designs.

Down.

Garden for kitching at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  or if possible  $\frac{1}{2}$  longer than large.

3 steps at least to the House.

Ifs, Eughs, Taxi, *Συλλακες*.

5 June, 1721. I took 2 Acres of land of John Man for 2 years beginning from our Lady Day last past at 1 pd. per Annum Acre.

The Damage for the Earth spoyled in the work referable to Mr. Dan. Walker and Mr. John Reynolds.

Hall as it may be altered 14 to the Hatch.

19 to the Chimney.

Entry as it may be altered 12

Length then 22.

These plans were not to be fulfilled. It has usually been taken for granted that the evening of the poet's life was spent mainly at Down Hall, but such was not the case. In 1720 the place was unfit for tenancy, and he only paid it flying visits in the company of architect and gardener. Not until June, 1721, was he living there, and most of his improvements were still in the future. Writing to Lord Harley, who had lost some coach-horses, he said:—

"I may tell you that the best way to save your future *dragons* is to make your journey to Wimpole two days, and take Down for your half-way house, which I hope may be effected in eighteen months, for I have already lopped the tree that is to make the plank that is to saw the timber that is to floor the room where I hope you

<sup>1</sup> Prior Papers (Longleat), xxix, f. 102.



will be within the time aforesaid. Your *O rus! quando te adspiciam?* is admirable before you had been two days in the town; you may laugh at my solitude as much as you please, but I like it infinitely, and shall do more so when the noise of the axes and hammers to the tune of five pound a week grows less tumultuous; but Down in itself considered I love more than Tully did his Tusculum or Horace his Sabine field, nor would quit it for anything but to be with you or to serve you.”<sup>1</sup>

A week later, he took up the same strain.

“I repeat to you that Down, being your half-way house to Wimpole, will save your cattle, and be the best inn you can sup at, for which reason I am now planting salating, and setting my eggs under the miller’s hen; the kitchen-garden this year, the apartment of three rooms the next, and what then? Why, what Monsieur Fouquet said to the late Queen of France when she asked him what he was building at Vaux. ‘Only a stable, Madam,’ he replied, ‘where your horses may bait in your way to Fontainebleau, and if I add a pavilion, ’tis because there are none but thatched houses in the village.’ . . . I am making a stile at the end of Great Hilly Field, where the cattle got in and did a power of wrong, to be sure, and putting brushwood under the old gate, where they plaguy pigs crept into the pease-close. . . .”<sup>2</sup>

But Matt was reckoning without that vanity of human wishes of which he had by nature so keen an appreciation. In July he returned to town and went with the Harleys to Wimpole, where, in the following month, he wrote a “brouillon” of what was apparently to have been a long poem on predestination. Early in September, however, he fell ill of a lingering fever. His

<sup>1</sup> *Longleat MSS.*, iii, 504.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

hosts did all they could for him, getting the best doctors both from the neighbourhood and from London, and nursing him with devotion. But he grew gradually worse, and at 1 o'clock in the morning, 18th September, 1721, he died.

He was mourned by his friends both as man and as poet. "Neither this nor any other nation, as far as I know," wrote Dr. William Stratford, "has any one of equal talents to him. Poetry is gone with him. The rest of the pretenders to it are but scribblers." This is hyperbolic praise. Swift's rings truer. He was writing to Archbishop King, and was actually referring to Matt in kindly reminiscence, when the news came. "I am just now told from some newspapers that one of the King's enemies and my excellent friend, Mr. Prior, is dead; I pray God deliver me from many such trials. I am neither old nor philosopher enough to be indifferent at so great a loss; and therefore I abruptly conclude." Those are the words of genuine grief. Prior, whatever his failings, had the art of making himself loved.

Of tributes in verse to the dead poet there were plenty. His most renowned mourner was Allan Ramsay, who celebrated him in a pastoral dialogue between "Robert, Richy and Sandy," that is to say, Oxford, Steele and Pope. It is not proposed to revive any of these lucubrations,<sup>1</sup> but a verse from Matt's friend, Robert Ingram's *Threnus*, has a certain interest.

Horace and he were called in haste  
From this vile earth to Heaven;  
The cruel year not fully passed,  
*Aetatis* fifty-seven.

<sup>1</sup> Those curious in eighteenth century panegyric should find much to their taste in a manuscript anthology entitled *Epistles to Mr. Prior, together with Extracts from several Authors who have made mention of him and his writings in their Works as well in Prose as Verse* [Harl MS., 4042].

As a matter of fact, Prior was in his fifty-eighth year ; but he would have been ready to strain a point in order to be coupled with his master.

A little before his death—9th August, 1721, to be exact—Prior made his will, appointing Lord Harley and Adrian Drift his executors. It is in many ways a characteristic document. He wished to be buried in Westminster Abbey, under an inscription by Dr. Robert Freind and the bust by Coysevox (whom he mis-names Coriveaux), which Louis XIV had given him. "For this last piece of human vanity," he left £500. To St. John's College, Cambridge, he gave books to the value of £200, which, together with his *Poems* "in the greatest paper," were to be kept with the books he had already given to that society. Prior's library, like his writings, indicate that he was a wide and desultory reader.<sup>1</sup> He also left the college his own portrait by Le Belle and that of the Earl of Jersey by Rigaud.

Six other pictures and "the busts of Flora, made by Girardon," were to go to Lord Harley, the picture of Queen Elizabeth by Portus to Lady Harley, and "my own picture in enamel to her dear daughter Margarett." The rest of his "pictures, medals, drawings, stamps and maps"—for Matt had been something of a collector—were to be valued and sold, Harley having the first refusal in every case. All manuscripts and papers were to be at the disposal of the executors.

After acknowledging Harley's right to the reversion of Down Hall, the testator proceeded to monetary dispositions. To Mrs. Elizabeth Cox he gave £1,000. The sum was to be invested in an annuity, which was to be paid solely to her order, "and not to be in the disposal or at the power of any husband which she may marry."

<sup>1</sup> See *Athenaeum*, 1897, i, 810.

This legacy was commended to Harley's special care. To Adrian Drift Matt left £1,000, "hoping that his industry and management will be such, that he will not embezzle or decrease the same"; to Mrs. Anne Durham £300 "to be employed for the enlargement of her stock and the support of that trade and calling wherein I have already placed her, and in which I wish her prosperity"; to Richard Shelton he forgave all debts, and to his son George Shelton gave £50 a year for six years, to keep him at the University or start him in a trade; to his cousin Catherine Harrison—the one relative remembered—whose identity has already been discussed, he left £100; <sup>1</sup> to his servants, a year's wages and mourning; and to John Oeman, or Newman, and Jane Ansley, £50 each in addition. Adrian Drift and Elizabeth Cox were named residuary legatees.

The legacy to Mrs. Cox caused some scandal. Prior, as Pope said, "was not a right good man," and his relations with the lady in question were notorious. "Everybody knows what a wretch she was," said the Twickenham bard; "I think she had been a little ale-house-keeper's wife." According to Arbuthnot, she herself kept an alehouse in Long Acre and had lost her husband a month before Prior died. On hearing of her lover's death, and her own good fortune, she boasted very grossly of her connection with him. Spence says that she subsequently married a cobbler. She is perhaps to be identified with the wife of that common soldier, also a resident of Long Acre, for a pipe and a chat with whom the poet would sometimes leave the company of Pope and Swift. She was supposed to have been his Chloe,

<sup>1</sup> See p. 12. Perhaps it was this cousin whose affairs (which were "bad enough") he was helping to settle, and to whom he was going for "something between a dinner and supper, and cards," in May, 1721. [*Longleat MSS.*, iii, 502.]

but she herself claimed to be Emma ("the Nut Brown Maid"), and said that Chloe was "Flanders Jane." It is probable that Chloe was the generic name for a succession of such ladies. Lisetta, perhaps, was Elizabeth Cox; while Nanny or Nannette, who was undoubtedly a real person, may have been that Anne Durham whom Matt had set up in business. There is little to be gained by such conjecture. Lights of love flit in and out of Prior's correspondence, whether he be at the Hague, at Paris or in London. But his irregularities were never paraded nor, except in verse, made to appear more romantic than they were. He was not a right good man; but neither was he a sentimental libertine; and, in spite of Conyers Place and all such moralists, he is to be commended for providing for a woman who had been much to him rather than for cousins who had been nothing.

Prior received the burial he desired, at the feet of Spenser. The bust by Coysevox and Freind's grandiloquent eulogy were duly set up. The tomb was built from designs by Gibbs, which had been made at Matt's own request but never seen by him. None of the three epitaphs which he had written for himself were placed on it. One of them, indeed—that known as *For My Own Tombstone*—he had made Atterbury promise should not be used; nor was either that or the *Epitaph Extempore* more appropriate to his than to any other man's remains. But the third and longest, though in the nature of a burlesque, contains lines which are more to the point than the windy rhetoric of Dr. Freind.

Nor to business a drudge, nor to faction a slave,  
He strove to make interest and freedom agree,  
In public employments industrious and grave,  
And alone with his friends, Lord how merry was he!

Now in equipage stately, now humbly on foot,  
Both fortunes he tried, but to neither would trust,  
And whirled in the round, as the wheel turned about,  
He found riches had wings, and knew man was but dust.

This is lightly sketched and needs a few heavier strokes to indicate the more pronounced virtues and failings of its subject. But, as far as it goes, it is an admirable likeness.

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